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20 Jun '90		~~MAY 08 2002~~	
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	~~13 Jun '91~~	~~AUG 04 2005~~	
AUG 20 1994		~~JUN 25 2008~~	
GAYLORD			PRINTED IN U.S.A.

TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

By TALBOT MUNDY

RUNG HO!
WINDS OF THE WORLD
KING OF THE KHYBER RIFLES
HIRA SINGH—WHEN INDIA CAME TO FIGHT IN FLANDERS
THE IVORY TRAIL
THE EYE OF ZEITOON
TOLD IN THE EAST
GUNS OF THE GODS
THE NINE UNKNOWN
OM
THE DEVIL'S GUARD
QUEEN CLEOPATRA
COCK OF THE NORTH
BLACK LIGHT
JIMGRIM
CAVES OF TERROR
JUNGLE JEST
C. I. D.
THE LION OF PETRA
THE GUNGA SAHIB
KING IN CHECK
TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

125

TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

BY TALBOT MUNDY

THE GNOME PRESS INC.
HICKSVILLE NEW YORK

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GNOME PRESS EDITION
1958

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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TO

ROSE WILDER LANE

WITH SINCERE GRATITUDE FOR HER
PERSISTENT INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM

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CHAPTER I

BRITAIN: THE LATE SUMMER OF 55 B.C.

These then are your liberties that ye inherit. If ye inherit sheep and oxen, ye protect those from the wolves. Ye know there are wolves, aye, and thieves also. Ye do not make yourselves ridiculous by saying neither wolf nor thief would rob you, but each to his own. Nevertheless, ye resent my warning. But I tell you, Liberty is alertness; those are one; they are the same thing. Your liberties are an offense to the slave, and to the enslaver also. Look ye to your liberties! Be watchful, and be ready to defend them. Envy, greed, conceit and ignorance, believing they are Virtue, see in undefended Liberty their opportunity to prove that violence is the grace of manhood.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

TOWARD sunset of a golden summer evening in a clearing in a dense oak forest five men and a woman sat beside a huge flat rock that lay half buried in the earth and tilted at an angle toward where the North Star would presently appear.

At the southern end of the clearing was a large house built of mud and wattle with a heavy thatched roof; it was surrounded by a fence of untrimmed branches, and within the enclosure there were about a dozen men and women attending a fire in the open air, cooking, and carrying water.

Across the clearing from a lane that led between enormous oaks, some cattle, driven by a few armed men clothed in little other than skins dawdled along a winding cow-path toward the opening in the fence. There was a smell of wood smoke and a hush that was entirely separate from the noise made by the cattle, the soft sigh of wind in the trees, the evensong of birds and the sound of voices. Expectancy was in the air.

The five men who sat by the rock were talking with interruptions, two of them being foreigners, who used one of the dialects of southern Gaul; and that was intelligible to one of the Britons who was a druid, and to the woman, who seemed to understand it perfectly, but not to the other men, to whom the druid had to keep interpreting.

"Speak slowly, Tros, speak slowly," urged the druid; but the big man, although he spoke the Gaulish perfectly, had a way of pounding his left palm with his right fist and interjecting Greek phrases for added emphasis, making his meaning even more incomprehensible.

He looked a giant compared to the others although he was not much taller than they. His clothing was magnificent, but travel-stained. His black hair, hanging nearly to his shoulders, was bound by a heavy gold band across his forehead. A cloak of purple cloth, embroidered around the edges with gold thread, partly concealed a yellow tunic edged with gold and purple.

He wore a long sword with a purple scabbard, suspended from a leather belt that was heavily adorned with golden studs. His forearm was a Titan's, and the muscles on his calves were like the roots of trees; but it was his face that held attention: Force, under control with immense stores in reserve; youth unconquerable, yet peculiarly aged before its time; cunning of the sort that is entirely separate from cowardice; imagination undivorced from concrete fact; an iron will and great good humor, that looked capable of blazing into wrath—all were written in the contours of forehead, nose and jaw. His leonine, amberous eyes contained a hint of red, and the breadth between them accentuated the massive strength of the forehead; they were eyes that seemed afraid of nothing, and incredulous of much; not intolerant, but certainly not easy to persuade.

His jaw had been shaved recently, to permit attention to a wound that had now nearly healed, leaving a deep indentation in the chin, and the black re-growing beard, silky in texture, so darkened the bronze skin that except for his size, he might almost have passed for an Iberian.

"Conops will tell you," he said, laying a huge hand on the shoulder of the man beside him, "how well I know this Caius Julius Cæsar. Conops, too, has had a taste of him. I have seen Cæsar's butchery. I know how he behaves to druids and to kings and to women and to all who oppose him, if he once has power. To obtain power—hah!—he pretends sometimes to be magnanimous. To keep it—"

Tros made a gesture with his right fist, showed his teeth in a grin of disgust and turned to the other Samothracian beside him.

"Is he or is he not cruel, Conops? Does he keep Rome's promises? Are Rome's or his worth that?" He snapped his fingers.

Conops grinned and laid a forefinger on the place where his right eye had been. Conops was a short man, of about the same age as Tros, possibly five-and-twenty, and of the same swarthy complexion; but he bore no other resemblance to his big companion. One bright-blue eye peered out from an impudent face, crowned with a knotted red kerchief. His nose was up-turned, as if it had been smashed in childhood. He had small brass earrings, similar in pattern to the heavy golden ones that Tros wore, and he was dressed in a smock of faded Tyrian blue, with a long knife tucked into a red sash at his waist. His thin, strong, bare legs looked as active as a cat's.

"Cæsar is as cruel as a fish!" he answered, nodding. "And he lies worse than a long-shore Alexandrian with a female slave for hire."

The druid had to interpret that remark, speaking in soft undertones from a habit of having his way without much argument. He was a broad-faced young man with a musical voice, a quiet smile and big brown eyes, dressed in a blue-dyed woolen robe that reached nearly to his heels—one of the bardic druids of the second rank.

It was the woman who spoke next, interrupting the druid's explanation, with her eyes on Tros. She seemed to gloat over his strength and yet to be more than half-suspicious of him, holding her husband by the arm and resting chin and elbow on her knee as she leaned forward to watch the big man's face. She was dressed in a marvelously worked tunic of soft leather, whose pricked-in, barbaric pattern had been stained with blue woad. Chestnut hair, beautifully cared for, hung to her waist; her brown eyes were as eager as a dog's; and though she was young and comely, and had not yet borne a child, she looked too pantherlike to be attractive to a man who had known gentler women.

"You say he is cruel, this Cæsar. Is that because he punished you for disobedience—or did you steal his woman?" she demanded.

Tros laughed—a heavy, scornful laugh from deep down near his stomach.

"No need to steal! Caius Julius Cæsar *gives* women away when he has amused himself," he answered. "He cares for none unless some other man desires her; and when he has spoiled her, he uses her as a reward for his lieutenants. On the march his soldiers cry out to the rulers of the towns to hide their wives away, saying they bring the maker of cuckolds with them. Such is Cæsar; a self-worshiper, a brainy rascal, the meanest cynic and the boldest thief alive. But he is lucky as well as clever, have no doubt of that."

The druid interpreted, while the woman kept her eyes on Tros.

"Is he handsomer than you? Are you jealous of him? Did he steal *your* wife?" she asked; and Tros laughed again, meeting the woman's gaze with a calmness that seemed to irritate her.

"I have no wife, and no wife ever had me," he answered. "When I meet the woman who can turn my head, my heart shall be the judge of her, Gwenhwyfar."

"Are you a druid? Are you a priest of some sort?" the woman asked. Her glowing eyes examined the pattern of the gold embroidery that edged his cloak.

Tros smiled and looked straight at the druid instead of at her. Conops drew in his breath, as if he was aware of danger.

"He is from Samothrace," the druid remarked. "You do not know what that means, Gwenhwyfar. It is a mystery."

The woman looked dissatisfied and rather scornful. She lapsed into silence, laying both elbows on her knees and her chin in both hands to stare at Tros even more intently. Her husband took up the conversation. He was a middle-sized active-looking man with a long moustache, dressed in wolf-skin with the fur side outward over breeches and a smock of knitted wool.

An amber necklace and a beautifully worked gold bracelet on his right wrist signified chieftainship of some sort. He carried his head with an air of authority that was increased by the care with which his reddish hair had been arranged to fall over his shoulders; but there was a suggestion of cunning and of weakness and cupidity at the corners of his eyes and mouth. The skin of his body had been stained blue, and the color had faded until the natural weathered white showed through it; the resulting blend was barbarously beautiful.

"The Romans who come to our shore now and then have things they like to trade with us for other things that we can easily supply. They are not good traders. We have much the best of it," he remarked.

Tros understood him without the druid's aid, laughed and thumped his right fist on his knee; but instead of speaking he paused and signed to them all to listen. There came one long howl, and then a wolf-pack chorus from the forest.

"This wolf smelt, and that wolf saw; then came the pack! What if ye let down the fence?" he said then. "It is good that ye have a sea around this island. I tell you, the wolves of the Tiber are less merciful than those, and more in number and more ingenious and more rapacious. *Those* wolves glut themselves; they steal a cow, maybe, but when they have a bellyful they go; and a full wolf falls prey to the hunter. But where Romans gain a foothold they remain, and there is no end to their devouring. I *saw* Cæsar cut off the right hands of thirty thousand Gauls because they disobeyed him. I say, I saw it."

"Perhaps they broke a promise," said the woman, tossing her head to throw the hair out of her eyes. "Commius the Gaul, whom Cæsar sent to talk with us, says the Romans bring peace and affluence and that they keep *their* promises."

"Affluence for *Commius,* aye, and for the Romans!" Tros answered. "Cæsar made Commius king of the Atrebates. But do you know what happened to the Atrebates first? How many men were crucified? How many women sold into slavery? How many girls dishonored? Aye, there is always peace where Rome keeps wolf's promises. Those are the only sort she ever keeps! Commius is king of a tribe that has no remaining fighting men nor virgins, and that toils from dawn to dark to pay the tribute money that Cæsar shall send to Rome—and for what? To bribe the Roman senators! And why? Because he plans to make himself the ruler of the world!"

"How do you know?" asked the woman, when the druid began to interpret that long speech. She motioned to the druid to be still—her ear was growing more accustomed to the Samothracian's strange pronunciation.

Tros paused, frowning, grinding his teeth with a forward movement of his iron jaw. Then he spoke, looking straight at the woman:

"I am from the isle of Samothrace, that never had a king, nor ever bowed to foreign yoke. My father is a prince of Samothrace, and *he* understands what that means." He glanced at the druid. "My father had a ship—a good ship, well manned with a crew of freemen—small, because there are no harbors in the isle of Samothrace and we must beach our ships, but seaworthy and built of Euxine timber, with fastenings of bronze. We had a purple sail; and that, the Romans said, was insolence.

"The Keepers of the Mysteries of Samothrace despatched my father in his ship to many lands, of which Gaul was one, for purposes which druids understand. Cæsar hates druids because the druids have secrets that they keep from him.

"He denounced my father as a pirate, although Pompey, the other tribune, who made war on pirates, paid my father homage and gave him a parchment with the Roman safe-conduct written on it. My name, as my father's son, was also on the parchment, as were the names of every member of the crew. I was second in command of that good ship. Conops was one of the crew; we two and my father are all who are left."

Tros paused, met Conops' one bright eye, nodded reminiscently, and waited while the druid translated what he had just said into the British tongue. The druid spoke carefully, avoiding further reference to the Mysteries. But the woman hardly listened to him; she had understood.

"Our business was wholly peaceful," Tros continued. "We carried succor to the Gauls, not in the form of weapons or appliances, but in the form of secret counsel to the druids whom Cæsar persecuted, giving them encouragement, advising them to bide their time and to depend on such resources as were no business of Cæsar's.

"And first, because Cæsar mistrusted us, he made us give up our weapons. Soon after, on a pretext, he sent for that parchment that Pompey had given my father; and he failed to return it. Then he sent men to burn our ship, for the sake of the bronze that was in her; and the excuse he gave was that our purple sail was a defiance of the Roman Eagles. Thereafter he made us all prisoners; and at that time Conops had two eyes."

Gwenhwyfar glanced sharply at Conops, made a half-contemptuous movement of her lips and threw the hair back on her shoulders.

"All of the crew, except myself and Conops, were flogged to death by Cæsar's orders in my father's presence," Tros went on. "They were accused of being spies. Cæsar himself affects to take no pleasure in such scenes, and he stayed in his tent until the cruelty was over. Nor did I witness it, for I also was in Cæsar's tent, he questioning me as to my father's secrets.

"But I pretended to know nothing of them. And Conops did not see the flogging, because they had put his eye out, by Cæsar's order, for a punishment, and for the time being they had forgotten him. When the last man was dead, my father was brought before Cæsar and the two beheld each other face to face, my father standing and Cæsar seated with his scarlet cloak over his shoulders, smiling with mean lips that look more cruel than a wolf's except when he is smiling at a compliment or flattering a woman. And because my father knows all these coasts, and Cæsar does not know them but, nevertheless, intends to invade this island—"

The druid interrupted.

"How does he know it is an island?" he asked. "Very few, except we and some of the chiefs, know that."

"My father, who has sailed around it, told him so in an unguarded moment."

"He should not have told," said the druid.

"True, he should not have told," Tros agreed. "But there are those who told Cæsar that Britain is a vast continent, rich in pearls and precious stones; he plans to get enough pearls to make a breastplate for the statue of the Venus Genetrix in Rome.

"So my father, hoping to discourage him, said that Britain is only an island, of no wealth at all, inhabited by useless people, whose women are ugly and whose men are for the most part deformed from starvation and sickness. But Cæsar did not believe him, having other information and being ambitious to possess pearls."

"We *have* pearls," said the woman, tossing her head again, pulling down the front of her garment to show a big pearl at her breast.

The druid frowned:

"Speak on, Tros. You were in the tent. Your father stood and confronted Cæsar. What then?"

"Cæsar, intending to invade this island of Britain, ordered that I should be flogged and crucified, saying: 'For your son looks strong, and he will die more painfully if he is flogged, because the flies will torture him. Let us see whether he will not talk, after they have tied him to the tree.'"

"What then?" asked the druid, with a strange expression in his eyes.

"Yes, what then?" said the woman, leaning farther forward to watch Tros's face. There was a half smile on her lips.

"My father offered himself in place of me," said Tros.

"And you agreed to it!" said the woman, nodding, seeming to confirm her own suspicion, and yet dissatisfied.

Tros laughed at her.

"Gwenhwyfar, I am not thy lover!" he retorted, and the woman glared. "I said to Cæsar, I would die by any means rather than be the cause of my father's death; and I swore to him to his face, as I stood between the men who held me, that if my father should die first, at his hands, he must slay me, too, and swiftly.

"Cæsar understood that threat. He lapsed into thought awhile, crossing one knee over the other, in order to appear at ease. But he was not at ease, and I knew then that he did not wish to slay either my father or me, having another use for us. So I said nothing."

"Most men usually say too much," the druid commented.

"And presently Cæsar dismissed us, commanding that we should be confined in one hut together," Tros went on. "And for a long while my father and I said nothing, for fear the guard without might listen. But in the night we lay on the dirt floor with our heads together, whispering, and my father said:

"'Death is but a little matter and soon over with, for even torture must come to an end; but a man's life should be lived to its conclusion, and it may be we can yet serve the purpose for which we came to Gaul. Remember this, my son,' said he, 'that whereas force may not prevail, a man may gain his end by seeming to yield, as a ship yields to the sea. And that is good, provided the ship does not yield too much and be swamped.'

"Thereafter we whispered far into the night. And in the morning when Cæsar sent for us we stood before him in silence, he considering our faces and our strength. My father is a stronger man than I.

"There were the ropes on the floor of the tent, with which they were ready to bind us; and there were knotted cords for the flogging; and two executioners, who stood outside the tent—they were Numidians—black men with very evil faces. And when he had considered us a long time Cæsar said:

" 'It is no pleasure to me to hand men of good birth over to the executioners.'

"He lied. There is nothing he loves better, for he craves the power of life and death, and the nobler his victim the more subtly he enjoys it. But we kept silence. Then he rearranged the wreath that he wears on his head to hide the baldness, and drew the ends of his scarlet cloak over his knees and smiled; for through the tent door he observed a woman they were bringing to him. He became in a hurry to have our business over with.

"It may be that the sight of the woman softened him, for she was very beautiful and very much afraid; or it may be that he knew all along what demand he would make. He made a gesture of magnanimity and said:

" 'I would that I might spare you; for you seem to me to be worthy men; but the affairs of the senate and the Roman people have precedence over my personal feelings, which all men will assure you are humane. If, out of respect for your good birth and courageous bearing—for I reckon courage chiefest of the virtues—I should not oblige you to reveal the druids' secrets, I would expect you in return to render Rome a service. Thereafter, you may both go free. What say you?'

"And my father answered: 'We would not reveal the druids' secrets, even if we knew them; nor are we afraid to die.'

"And Cæsar smiled. 'Brave men,' he said, 'are more likely than cowards to perform their promises. I am sending Caius Volusenus with a ship to the coast of Britain to discover harbors and the like, and to bring back information. If he can, he is to persuade the Britons not to oppose my landing; but if he can not, he is to discover the easiest place where troops can be disembarked. It would give me a very welcome opportunity to exercise my magnanimity, which I keep ever uppermost in mind, if both of you would give your promises to me to go with Caius Volusenus, to assist him with all your knowledge of navigation; and to return with him. Otherwise, I must not keep the executioners waiting any longer.'

"I looked into my father's eyes, and he into mine, and we nodded. My father said to Cæsar:

" 'We will go with Caius Volusenus and will return with him, on the condition of your guarantee that we may go free afterward. But we must be allowed to travel with proper dignity, as free men, with our weapons. Unless you will agree to that, you may as well command your executioners, for we will not yield.'

"And at that, Cæsar smiled again, for he appreciates dignity—more especially if he can subtly submit it to an outrage.

" 'I have your promise then?' he asked; and we both said, 'Yes.'

"Whereat he answered: 'I am pleased. However, I will send but one of you. The other shall remain with me as hostage. You observe, I have not put you under oath, out of respect for your religion, which you have told me is very sacred and forbids the custom we Romans observe of swearing on the altar of the gods.'

"But he lied—he lied. Cæsar cares nothing for religion.

" 'The son shall make the journey and the father shall remain,' he said to us, 'since I perceive that each loves the other. Should the son not keep his promise, then the father shall be put to certain trying inconveniences in the infliction of which, I regret to say, my executioners have a large experience.'

"He would have dismissed us there and then, but I remembered Conops, who alone of all our crew was living, and I was minded to save Conops. Also I knew that my father would wish that, and at any cost, although we dared not speak to each other in Cæsar's presence. So I answered:

" 'So be it, Cæsar. But the promise on your part is that I shall go with dignity, and thereto I shall need a servant.'

" 'I will give you a Gaul,' said he.

"'I have no use for Gauls,' I answered. 'They are treacherous.' And at that he nodded. 'But there is one of our men,' said I, 'who escaped your well-known clemency and still endures life. Mercifully, your lieutenants have deprived him of an eye, so he is not much use, but I prefer him, knowing he will not betray me to the Britons.'

"Cæsar was displeased with that speech, but he was eager they should bring the woman to him, so he gave assent. But he forbade me to speak with my father again until I should return from Britain, and they took my father away and placed him in close confinement.

"A little later they brought Conops to me, sick and starved; but the centurion who had charge of prisoners said to me that if I would promise to bring him back six fine pearls from Britain, he for his part would see to it that my father should be well treated in my absence. So I promised to do what might be done. I said neither yes nor no."

"We *have* pearls," said the woman, looking darkly at Tros, tossing her hair again.

"Nevertheless," Tros answered, "to give pearls to a Roman is to arouse greed less easy to assuage than fire!"

"You said Cæsar will make himself master of the world. What made you say that?" asked the woman.

"I will tell that presently, Gwenhwyfar—when Caswallon * and the other druids come," he answered.

CHAPTER II

"AND YE KNOW WHETHER CÆSAR LIES OR NOT"

Listen to me before ye fill your bellies in the places habit has accustomed you to think are safe. Aye, and while ye fill your bellies, ponder. Hospitality and generosity and peace, ye all agree are graces. Are they not your measures of a man's nobility? Ye measure well. But to ignorant men, to whom might is right, I tell you gentleness seems only an opportunity. If ye are slaves of things and places, appetites and habits, rather than masters of them, surely the despoiler shall inflict upon you a more degrading slavery. Your things and places he will seize. Your appetites and habits he will mock, asserting that they justify humiliation that his violence imposes on you. Be ye, each one, master of himself, or ye shall have worse masters.

---

* By the Romans called Cassivelaunus.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE long British twilight had deepened until the trees around the clearing were a whispering wall of gloom, and a few pale stars shone overhead. The wolves howled again, making the cattle shift restlessly within the fence, and a dozen dogs bayed angrily. But the five who sat by the rock in the midst of the clearing made no move, except to glance expectantly toward the end of the glade.

And presently there began to be a crimson glow behind the trees. A chant, barbaric, weird and wonderful, without drumbeat or accompaniment, repeating and repeating one refrain, swelled through the trees as the crimson glow grew nearer.

Tros rose to his feet, but the druid and the others remained seated, the woman watching Tros as if she contemplated springing at him, although whether for the purpose of killing him, or not, was not so evident. Conops watched *her* equally intently.

It looked as if the forest was on fire, until men bearing torches appeared in the mouth of the glade, and a long procession wound its way solemnly and slowly toward the rock. The others stood up then and grouped themselves behind Tros and the druid, the druid throwing back his head and chanting a response to the refrain, as if it were question and answer. The woman took her husband's hand, but he appeared hardly to notice it; he was more intent on watching the approaching druids, his expression a mixture of challenge and dissatisfaction. He began to look extremely dignified.

There were a dozen druids, clad in long robes, flanked and followed by torchbearers dressed in wolf-skin and knitted breeches. They were led by an old man whose white beard fell nearly to his waist. Five of the other druids were in white robes, and bearded, but the rest were clean-shaven and in blue; all wore their hair long and over their shoulders, and no druid had any weapon other than a sickle, tucked into a girdle at the waist. The torchbearers were armed with swords and spears; there were fifty of them, and nearly as many women, who joined in the refrain, but the old High Druid's voice boomed above all, mellow, resonant and musical.

The procession was solemn and the chant religious; yet there was hardly any ceremony when they came to a stand near the rock and the old druid strode out in front of the others, alone. The chant ceased then, and for a moment there was utter silence. Then the druid who had been acting as interpreter took Tros's right hand and led him toward the old man, moving so as to keep Tros's hand concealed from those behind. The old man held out his own right hand, the younger druid lifting the end of Tros's cloak so as to conceal what happened.

A moment later Tros stepped back and saluted with the graceful Mediterranean gesture of the hand palm outward, and there the ceremony ceased.

The old druid sat down on a stone beside the rock; his fellow druids found places near him in an irregular semicircle; the crowd stood, shaking their torches at intervals to keep them burning, the glare and the smoke making splotches of crimson and black against the trees.

The younger druid spoke then in rapid undertones, apparently rehearsing to the older man the conversation that had preceded his arrival. Then Tros, with his left hand at his back and his right thrown outward in a splendid gesture that made Gwenhwyfar's eyes blaze, broke silence, speaking very loud:

"My father, I know nothing of the stars, beyond such lore as seamen use; but they who do know say that Cæsar's star is in ascension, and that nightly in the sky there gleam the omens of increasing war."

The High Druid nodded gravely. The chief let go his wife's hand, irritated because she seemed able to understand all that was said, whereas he could not. The younger druid whispered to him. It was growing very dark now, and scores of shadowy figures were gathering in the zone of torchlight from the direction of the forest. There was a low murmur, and an occasional clank of weapons. Tros, conscious of the increasing audience, raised his voice:

"They who sent me hither say this isle is sacred. Cæsar, whose camp-fires ye may see each night beyond the narrow sea that separates your cliffs from Gaul, is the relentless enemy of the druids and of all who keep the ancient secret.

"Ye have heard—ye *must* have heard—how Cæsar has stamped out the old religion from end to end of Gaul, as his armies have laid waste the corn and destroyed walled towns. Cæsar understands that where the Wisdom dwells, freedom persists and grows again, however many times its fields are reaped. Cæsar does not love freedom.

"In Gaul there is no druid now who dares to show himself. Where Cæsar found them, he has thrown their tortured carcasses to feed the dogs and crows. And for excuse, he says the druids make human sacrifice, averring that they burn their living victims in cages made of withes.

"Cæsar, who has slain his hecatombs, who mutilates and butchers men, women, children, openly in the name of Rome, but secretly for his own ambition; Cæsar, who has put to death more druids than ye have slain wolves in all Britain, *says* that the druids burn human sacrifices. Ye know whether Cæsar lies or not."

He paused. The ensuing silence was broken by the whispering of men and women who translated his words into the local dialect. Some of the druids moved among the crowd, assisting. Tros gave them time, watching the face of the chief and of his wife Gwenhwyfar, until the murmur died down into silence. Then he resumed:

"They who sent me into Gaul, are They who keep the Seed from which your druids' wisdom springs. But he who sent me to this isle is Cæsar. They who sent me into Gaul are They who never bowed a knee to conqueror and never by stealth or violence subdued a nation to their will. But he who sent me hither knows no other law than violence; no other peace than that imposed by him; no other object than his own ambition.

"He has subdued the north of Gaul; he frets in idleness and plays with women, because there are no more Gauls to conquer before winter sets in. He has sent me hither to bid you let him land on your coast with an army. The excuse he offers you, is that he wishes to befriend you.

"The excuse he sends to Rome, where his nominal masters spend the extorted tribute money wrung by him from Gauls to buy his own preferment, is that you Britons have been sending assistance to the Gauls, wherefore he intends to punish you. And the excuse he gives to his army is, that here is plunder—here are virgins, cattle, clothing, precious metals and the pearls with which he hopes to make a breastplate for the Venus Genetrix.

"Cæsar holds my father hostage against my return. I came in Cæsar's ship, whose captain, Caius Volusenus, ordered me to show him harbors where a fleet of ships might anchor safely, threatening me that, unless I show them to him, he will swear away my father's life on my return; for Caius Volusenus hopes for Cæsar's good-will, and he knows the only way it may be had.

"But I told Caius Volusenus that I know no harbors. I persuaded him to beach his ship on the open shore, a two days' journey from this place. And there, where we landed with fifty men, we were attacked by Britons, of whom one wounded me, although I had not as much as drawn my sword.

"Your Britons drove the Romans back into the ship, which put to sea again, anchoring out of bowshot; but I, with my man Conops, remained prisoner in the Britons' hands—and a druid came, and staunched my wound.

"So I spoke with the druid—he is here—behold him—he will confirm my words. And a Roman was allowed to come from the ship and to take back a message to Caius Volusenus, that I am to be allowed to speak with certain chiefs and thereafter that I may return to the ship; but that none from the ship meanwhile may set foot on the shore.

"And in that message it was said that I am to have full opportunity to deliver to you Cæsar's words, and to obtain your consent, if ye will give it, to his landing with an army before the winter storms set in.

"Thus Caius Volusenus waits. And yonder on the coast of Gaul waits Cæsar. My father waits with shackles on his wrists. And I, who bring you Cæsar's message, and who love my father, and who myself am young, with all my strength in me, so that death can not tempt, and life seems good and full of splendor—I say to you: Defy this Cæsar!"

He would have said more, but a horn sounded near the edge of the trees and another twenty men strode into the clearing, headed by a Gaul who rode beside a Briton in a British chariot. The horses were half frantic from the torchlight and fear of wolves, but their heads were held by men in wolf-skin who kept them to the track by main strength. Conops plucked at the skirt of Tros's tunic:

"Commius!" he whispered, and Tros growled an answer under his breath.

The two men in the chariot stood upright with the dignity of kings, and as they drew near, with the torchlight shining on their faces, Tros watched them narrowly. But Conops kept his one bright eye on Gwenhwyfar, for she, with strange, nervous twitching of the hands, was watching Tros as intently as he eyed the stranger. Her breast was heaving.

The man pointed out as Commius was a strongly built, black-bearded veteran, who stood half a head shorter than the Briton in the chariot beside him. He was dressed in a Roman toga, but with a tunic of unbleached Gaulish wool beneath. His eyes were bold and crafty, his head proud and erect, his smile assuring. Somewhere there was a trace of weakness in his face, but it was indefinable, suggestive of lack of honor rather than physical cowardice, and, at that, not superficial. His beard came up high on his cheek-bones and his black hair low on a broad and thoughtful forehead.

"Britomaris!" cried the driver of the chariot, and he was a chief beyond shadow of doubt, with his skin stained blue and his wolf-skins fastened by a golden brooch—a shaggy-headed, proud-eyed man with whipcord muscles and a bold smile half-hidden under a heavy brown moustache.

The husband of Gwenhwyfar stood up, dignified enough but irresolute, his smoldering eyes sulky and his right hand pushing at his wife to make her keep behind him. She stood staring over his shoulder, whispering between her teeth into his ear. The chief who drove the horses spoke again, and the tone of his loud voice verged on the sarcastic:

"O Britomaris, this is Commius, who comes from Gaul to tell us about Cæsar. He brings gifts."

At the mention of gifts, Britomaris would have stepped up to the chariot, but his wife prevented, tugging at him, whispering; but none noticed that except Tros, Conops and the druids.

At a signal from the other chief a man in wolf-skins took up the presents from the chariot and brought them—a cloak of red cloth, a pair of Roman sandals and three strings of brass beads threaded on a copper wire.

It was cheap stuff of lower quality than the trade goods that occasional Roman merchants brought to British shores. Britomaris touched the gifts without any display of satisfaction. He hardly glanced at them, perhaps because his wife was whispering.

"Who is here?" asked Commius, looking straight at Tros.

At that Conops took a swift stride closer to his master, laying a hand on the hilt of his long knife. Gwenhwyfar laughed, and Britomaris nudged her angrily.

"I am one who knows Commius the Gaul!" said Tros, returning stare for stare. "I am another who runs Cæsar's errands, although Cæsar never offered me a puppet kingdom. Thou and I, O Commius, have eaten leavings from the same trough. Shall we try to persuade free men that it is a good thing to be slaves?"

The chief who had brought Commius laughed aloud, for he understood the Gaulish, and he also seemed to understand the meaning of Gwenhwyfar's glance at Britomaris. Commius, his grave eyes missing nothing of the scene, stepped down from the chariot and, followed by a dozen men with torches, walked straight up to Tros.

His face looked deathly white in the torch glare, but whether or not he was angry it was difficult to guess, because he smiled with thin lips and had his features wholly in control. Tros smiled back at him, good nature uppermost, but an immense suspicion in reserve.

Gwenhwyfar, clinging to her man's arm, listened with eager eyes and parted lips. Conops drew his knife clandestinely and hid it in a tunic fold.

"I know the terms on which Cæsar sent you. I know who is hostage for you in Cæsar's camp," said Commius; and Tros, looking down at him, for he was taller by a full hand's breadth, laid a heavy right hand on his shoulder.

"Commius," he said, "it may be well to yield to Cæsar for the sake of temporary peace—to give a breathing spell to Gaul—to save thine own neck, that the Gauls may have a leader when the time comes. For this Cæsar, who seems invincible, will hardly live forever; and the Gauls in their day of defeat have need of you as surely as they will need your leadership when Cæsar's bolt is shot. That day will come. But is it the part of a man, to tempt these islanders to share your fate?"

"Tros, you are rash!" said Commius, speaking through his teeth. "I am the friend of Cæsar."

"I am the friend of all the world, and that is a higher friendship," Tros answered. "Though I were the friend of Cæsar, I would nonetheless hold Cæsar less than the whole world. But I speak of this isle and its people. Neither you nor I are Britons. Shall we play the man toward these folk, or shall we ruin them?"

The crowd was pressing closer, and the chief in his chariot urged the horses forward so that he might overhear; their white heads tossed in the torchlight like fierce apparitions from another world.

"If I dared trust you," Commius said, his black eyes searching Tros's face.

"Do the Gauls trust *you?*" asked Tros. "Are you a king among the Gauls? You may need *friends* from Britain when the day comes." *

"You intend to betray me to Cæsar!" said Commius, and at that Tros threw back his shock of hair and laughed, his eyes in the torchlight showing more red than amber.

"If that is all your wisdom, I waste breath," he answered.

Commius was about to speak when another voice broke on the stillness, and all eyes turned toward the rock. The old High Druid had climbed to its summit and stood leaning on a staff, his long beard whiter than stone against the darkness and ruffled in the faint wind—a splendid figure, dignity upholding age.

"O Caswallon, and you, O Britomaris, and ye sons of the isle, hear my words!" he began.

And as the crowd surged for a moment, turning to face the rock and listen, Gwenhwyfar wife of Britomaris came and tugged at Tros's sleeve. He thought it was Conops, and waited, not moving his head, expecting a whispered warning; but the woman tugged again and he looked down into her glowing eyes. She pointed toward the house at the far end of the clearing.

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* Cæsar made Commius king of the Atrebates, half of which tribe lived in Britain and half in Gaul. There is no historic record, however, of the British Atrebates having accepted Commius as king.

"Thither I go," she whispered. "If you are as wise as you seem fearless, you will follow."

"I would hear this druid," Tros answered, smiling as he saw the point of Conops' knife within a half inch of the woman's ribs.

"He will talk until dawn!"

"Nonetheless, I will hear him."

"You will hear what is more important if you follow me," she answered; and at that, she left him, stepping back so quickly that the point of Conops' long knife pricked her and she struck him angrily, then vanished like a shadow.

Tros strode slowly after her, with Conops at his heels, but when he reached the gloom beyond the outskirts of the crowd he paused.

"Am I followed?" he asked.

"Nay, master. They are like the fish around a dead man. One could gather all of them within a net. Do we escape?"

"I know what the druid will say," Tros answered. "I could say it myself. What that woman has to say to me, I know not. Though it may be she has set an ambush."

Conops chuckled.

"Aye! The kind of ambush they set for sailormen on the wharfsides of Saguntum! A long drink, and then—"

He whistled a few bars of the love song of the Levantine ports:

Oh, what is in the wind that fills
The red sail straining at the mast?
Oh, what beneath the purple hills
That overlean the Cydnus, thrills
The sailor seeing land at last?
Oh, Chloe and—

"Be still!" commanded Tros. "If there were no more risk than that, my father would be free to-morrow! Which way went the woman?"

Conops pointed, speaking his mind as usual:

"That Briton who came in the chariot—Caswallon—fills my eye. But I would not trust Commius the Gaul; he has a dark look."

"He is anxious for his Gauls, as I am anxious for my father," Tros answered. "He hates Cæsar, and he likes me; but for the sake of his Gauls he would stop at nothing. He would bring Cæsar to this island, just to give the Atrebates time to gather strength at Cæsar's rear. Nay, he may not be trusted."

"Master, will you trust these Britons?" Conops asked him, suddenly, from behind, as he followed close in his steps along a track that wound among half-rotted tree stumps toward the cattle fence. Tros turned and faced him.

"It is better that the Britons should trust *me,*" he answered.

"But to what end, master?"

"There are two ends to everything in this world, even to a ship," said Tros darkly; "two ends to Cæsar's trail, and two ways of living life: on land and water. Make sure we are not followed."

The dogs barked fiercely as they approached the fence, and Conops grew nervous, pulling at his master's cloak.

"Nay, it is a good sign," said Tros. "If it were a trap they would have quieted the dogs."

He turned again to make sure no one was following. The torchlight shone on the High Druid's long white robe and whiter beard, and on a sea of faces that watched him breathlessly. The old man was talking like a waterfall. They were too far away now for his words to reach them, but judging by his gestures he was very angry and was in no mood to be brief.

"On guard!" warned Conops suddenly as they started toward the fence again, but Tros made no move to reach for his sword.

It was the woman Gwenhwyfar, waiting in a shadow. She stepped out into the firelight that shone through a gap in the fence and signed to Tros to follow her, leading around to the rear of the house, where a door, sheltered by a rough porch, opened toward the forest.

She led the way in, and they found themselves in a room whose floor was made of mud and cow dung trampled hard. There was a fire in the midst, and a hole in the roof to let the smoke out. She spoke to a hag dressed in ragged skins, who stirred the fire to provide light and then vanished through an inner door.

The firelight shone on smooth mud walls, adzed beams, two benches and a table.

"Your home?" asked Tros, puzzled, and Gwenhwyfar laughed.

"I am a chief's wife; I am wife of Britomaris," she answered. "Our serfs, who mind the cattle, live in this place."

"Where then is your home?" asked Tros.

She pointed toward the north.

"When Caswallon comes, we leave home," she answered. "The power to use our house is his, but we are not his serfs."

Gwenhwyfar's attitude suggested secrecy. She seemed to wish Tros to speak first, as if she would prefer to answer questions rather than to force the conversation. She looked extremely beautiful in the firelight; the color had risen to her cheeks and her eyes shone like jewels, brighter than the gleaming ornaments on her hair and arms and breast.

"Why do you fear Caswallon?" Tros asked her suddenly.

"I? I am not afraid!" she answered. "Britomaris fears him, but not I! Why should I be afraid? Caswallon is a strong chief, a better man than Britomaris; and I hate him! He—how strong is Cæsar?" she demanded.

Tros studied her a moment. He gave her no answer. She sat down on one of the benches, signing to him and Conops to be seated on the other.

"You said Cæsar will make himself master of the world," she remarked after a minute, stretching her skin-clad legs toward the blaze. She was not looking at Tros now but at the fire. "Why did you say that?"

Suddenly she met his eyes, and glanced away again. Conops went and sat down on the floor on the far side of the fire.

CHAPTER III

GWENHWYFAR, WIFE OF BRITOMARIS

Beware the ambitious woman! All things and all men are her means to an end. All treacheries are hers. All reasons justify her. Though her end is ruin, shall that lighten your humiliation—ye whom she uses as means to that end that she contemptuously seeks?

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Tros made no answer for a long time, but stared first at the fire and then at Gwenhwyfar.

"Send that man away," she suggested, nodding toward Conops; but Tros scratched his chin and smiled.

"I prefer to be well served," he answered. "How can he keep secrets unless he knows them? Nay, nay, Gwenhwyfar; two men with three eyes are as good again as one man with but two; and even so, the two are not too many when another's wife bears watching! Speak on."

Her eyes lighted up with challenge as she tossed her head. But she laughed and came to the point at once, looking straight and hard at him.

"Commius spoke to me of Cæsar. He said he is Cæsar's deputy. He urged me to go with him and visit Cæsar. Britomaris is a weak chief; he has no will; he hates Caswallon and yet bows to him. Cæsar is strong."

"I am *not* Cæsar's deputy, whatever Commius may be," said Tros. "But this I tell you, and you may as well remember it, Gwenhwyfar: A thousand women have listened to Cæsar's wooing, and I have been witness of the fate of some. There was a woman of the Gauls, a great chief's daughter, who offered herself to him to save her people. Cæsar passed her on to one of his lieutenants, and thereafter sold her into slavery."

"Perhaps she did not please him," Gwenhwyfar answered. And then, since Tros waited in silence, "I have pearls."

"You have also my advice regarding them," said Tros.

Gwenhwyfar waited a full minute, thinking, as if appraising him. She nodded, three times, slowly.

"You, who have lost all except your manhood and the clothes you wear!" she said at last, and her voice was bold and stirring, "what is *your* ambition?"

"To possess a ship," he answered, so promptly that he startled her.

"A ship? Is that all?"

"Aye, and enough. A man is master on his own poop. A swift ship, a crew well chosen, and a man may laugh at Cæsars."

"And yet—you say, you had a ship? And a crew well chosen?"

Tros did not answer. His brows fell heavily and half concealed eyes that shone red in the firelight.

"Better be Cæsar's ward, and rule a kingdom, than wife of a petty chief who dares not disobey Caswallon," Gwenhwyfar said, looking her proudest. "Caswallon might have had me to wife, but *he* chose Fflur. There was nothing left for me but Britomaris. If he were a strong man I could have loved him. He is weak.

"He likes to barter wolf-skins on the shore with the Roman and Tyrian traders. He pays tribute to Caswallon. He does not even dare to build a town and fortify it, least Caswallon should take offense.

"He obeys the druids, as a child obeys its nurse, in part because he is afraid of them, but also because it is the easiest thing to do. He is not a man, such as Caswallon might have been—such as *you* are."

She paused, with parted lips, looking full and straight at Tros. Conops tapped the dirt floor rhythmically with the handle of his knife. A man in the next room began singing about old mead and the new moon.

"It is a ship, not a woman that I seek," said Tros, and her expression hardened.

But she tried again:

"You might have a hundred ships."

"I will be better satisfied with one."

She began to look baffled; eyes and lips hinted anger that she found it difficult to hold in check.

"Is that your price?" she asked. "A ship?"

"Woman!" said Tros after a minute's silence, laying his great right fist on his knee, "you and I have no ground that we can meet on. You would sell your freedom. I would die for mine."

"Yet you live!" she retorted. "Did you come to Britain of your free will? Where is your freedom? You are Cæsar's messenger!"

She got up suddenly and sat down on the bench beside him, he not retreating an inch. Not even his expression changed, but his shoulders were rigid and his hands were pressing very firmly on his knees.

"Do you not understand?" she asked.

"I understand," he answered.

Suddenly she flared up, her eyes blazing and her voice trembling. She did not speak loud, but with a slow distinctness that made each word like an arrow speeding to the mark.

"Am I not fair?" she asked, and he nodded.

Her eyes softened for a moment, then she went on:

"Caswallon was the first and is the last who shall deny me! I can be a good wife—a very god's wife to a man worth loving! Cæsar can conquer Caswallon, but not alone. He will need my help, and yours. Cæsar made Commius a king over the Atrebates; and what was Commius before that? Cæsar shall make me a queen where Caswallon lords it now! And you—?"

"And Britomaris?" asked Tros, watching her.

"And you?" she said again, answering stare for stare.

Her breast was heaving quickly, like a bird's.

"Oh, Tros!" she went on. "Are you a man, or are you timid? Here a kingdom waits for you! Yonder, in Gaul, is Cæsar, who can make and unmake kingdoms! Here am I! I am a woman, I am all a woman. I love manhood. I do not love Britomaris."

Conops stirred the fire.

"Do you not see that if you are all a woman you must oppose Cæsar?" Tros asked. "Then—let Cæsar outrage! Let him slay! He will have done nothing, because your spirit will go free, Gwenhwyfar. Cæsar plans an empire of men's bodies, with his own—his epileptic, foul, unchaste and hairless head crowned master of them all! Whoso submits to him is a slave—a living carcass. Hah! Defy him! Scorn him! Resist him to the last breath! The worst he can do then will be to torture a brave body till the braver soul goes free!"

His words thrilled her.

"Well enough," she answered promptly. "I am brave. I can defy Cæsar. But I need a braver chief to make the stand with me than Britomaris. If Caswallon had taken me to wife—but he chose Fflur—perhaps it was as well—you are nobler than Caswallon, and—"

"And what?" asked Tros.

She answered slowly:

"A bold man now could conquer Britain. The druids—I know them—the druids would support one who opposed the Romans. They fear for their own power should Cæsar gain a foothold. The druids trust you. Why? They do not trust me. Tros! Strike a bargain with the druids. Slay Caswallon. Seize the chieftainship, and raise an army against Cæsar!"

"And Britomaris?"

"Challenge him!" she answered. "He would run! I have the right according to our law, to leave a man who runs away."

"Gwenhwyfar!" Tros exclaimed, getting up and standing straight in front of her. "It is Cæsar, and not I who has the falling sickness! You and I lack that excuse! Know this: I will neither steal a wife from Britomaris, nor a throne from Caswallon; nor will I impose my will on Britain."

She stood up, too, and faced him, very angry.

"Have you never loved?" she asked, and though her eyes were steady, the gold brooch on her breast was fluttering.

"Loved? Aye, like a man!" he answered. "I have loved the sea since I was old enough to scramble down the cliffs of Samothrace and stand knee deep to watch the waves come in! The sea is no man's master, nor a bed of idleness! The sea holds all adventure and the keys of all the doors of the unknown!

"The sea, Gwenhwyfar, is the image of a man's life. If he flinches, if he fails, it drowns him. Is he lazy, does he fail to mend his ship or steadfastly to be example to his crew, there are rocks, shoals, tides, the pirates, storms. But is he stanch, he sails, until he reaches unknown ports, where the gods trade honesty for the experience he brings! I seek but a ship, Gwenhwyfar. I will carve a destiny that suits me better than a stolen kingdom and a cheated husband's bed!"

She reached out a hand unconsciously and touched his arm:

"Tros," she answered, "Caswallon has some longships hidden in the marshes of the Thames. Take me—take a ship, and—"

"Nay," he answered. "Caswallon owes me nothing. He who owes me a good ship is Cæsar!"

"And you think that you can make Cæsar pay?" she asked. "Take me to Cæsar, Tros; between us we will cheat him of a ship! With you to teach me, I could learn to love the sea."

He stepped back a pace or two, would have stumbled backward against the clay hearth if Conops had not warned him.

"None learns to love," he answered. "Love is a man's nature. He is this, or he is that; none can change him. I am less than half a man, until I feel the deck heave under me and look into a rising gale. You, Gwenhwyfar, you are less than half a woman until you pit your wits against a man who loves to master you; and I find no amusement in such mastery. Make love to Britomaris."

She reddened in the firelight, stood up very proudly, biting her lip. Her eyes glittered, but she managed to control herself; there were no tears.

"Shall I bear a coward's children?" she demanded.

"I know not," said Tros. "You shall not bear mine. I will save you, if I can, from Cæsar."

Tears were very near the surface now, but pride, and an emotion that she did her utmost to conceal, aided her to hold them back.

"Forgive me!" she said suddenly.

Her hands dropped, but she raised them again and folded them across her breast.

"Forgive me, Tros! I was mad for a short minute. It is maddening to be a coward's wife. I tempted you, to see how much a man you truly are."

Conops' knife hilt tapped the floor in slow staccato time.

"Kiss me, and say good-by," she coaxed, unclasping her hands again.

"Nay, no good-bys!" he answered, laughing. "We shall meet again. And as for kissing, a wise seaman takes no chances near the rocks, Gwenhwyfar!"

Stung—savage—silent, she gestured with her head toward the door, folding her arms on her breast, and Tros, bowing gravely, strode out into darkness. Conops shut the door swiftly behind them.

"If this isle were in *our* sea, she would have thrown a knife," said Conops, twitching his shoulder-blades. "Master, you have made an enemy."

"Not so," Tros answered. "I have found one. Better the rocks in sight than shoals unseen, my lad! Let us see now who our friends are."

He strode toward the torchlight, where the old High Druid was still holding forth, swaying back and forward on the summit of the rock as he leaned to hurl his emphasis. More chariots had come and horses' heads were nodding on the outskirts of the crowd—phantoms in the torch-smoke.

Tros kept to the deeper shadows, circling the crowd until he could approach Commius and Caswallon from the rear. He was stared at by new arrivals as he began to work his way toward them, but the Britons had too good manners and too much dignity to interfere with him or block his way.

The women in the crowd stared and smiled, standing on tiptoe, some of them, frankly curious, but neither impudent nor timid. Most of them were big-eyed women with long eyelashes and well-combed braided hair hanging to the waist. Nearly all had golden ornaments; but there were slave women among them, who seemed to belong to another race, dressed in plain wool or even plainer skins.

It was a crowd that, on the whole, was more than vaguely conscious of the past it had sprung from.

Glances cast at Tros were less of admiration than expectancy, to see him exhibit manners less civilized than theirs—the inevitable attitude of islanders steeped in tradition and schooled in the spiritual mysticism of the druids; proud, and yet considerate of the stranger; warlike, because decadence had undermined material security, but chivalrous because chivalry never dies until the consciousness of noble ancestry is dead, and theirs was living.

Commius the Gaul, who, when he was not deliberately controlling his expression, had the hard face and the worried look of a financier, was seated beside Caswallon. The chief was standing in the chariot, his gold-and-amber shoulder-ornaments shining in the torchlight. He smiled when he caught sight of Tros, and with a nudge stirred Commius out of a brown study. Commius, adjusting his expression carefully, got down from the chariot, took Tros's arm, and led him to the chief.

"Tros, son of Perseus, Prince of Samothrace," he announced.

Caswallon stretched out a long, white, sleeveless arm, on which strange pagan designs had been drawn in light-blue woad. It was an immensely strong arm, with a heavy golden bracelet on the wrist.

They shook hands and, without letting go, the chieftain pulled

Tros up into the chariot. Britomaris, from about a chariot's length away, watched thoughtfully, peering past a woman's shoulder.

The old High Druid was talking too fast for Tros to follow him; he was holding the rapt attention of the greater part of the crowd, and it was less than a minute before Tros was forgotten. The old druid had them by the ears, and their eyes became fixed on his face as if he hypnotized them.

But his eloquence by no means hypnotized himself. His bright old eyes scanned the faces in the torchlight as if he were judging the effect of what he said, and he turned at intervals to face another section of the crowd, signing to the torchmen to distribute their light where he needed it.

Moreover, he changed his tone of voice and his degree of vehemence to suit whichever section of the crowd he happened to be facing. There were groups of dark-haired swarthy men and women, who looked consciously inferior to the taller, white-skinned, reddish-haired breed, or, if not consciously inferior, then aware that the others thought them so. He spoke to them in gentler, more persuasive cadences.

Caswallon watched the druid in silence for a long time; yet he hardly appeared to be listening; he seemed rather to be waiting for a signal. At last he lost patience and whispered to a man in a leather sleeveless tunic who leaned on a spear beside the chariot.

The man whispered to one of the younger druids, who approached the pulpit rock from a side that at the moment was in darkness. Climbing, he lay there in shadow, and, watching his opportunity when the old man paused for breath, spoke a dozen words.

The old druid nodded and dismissed him with a gesture. The younger druid worked his way back through the crowd to the chariot wheel and whispered to Caswallon.

The man with the spear received another whispered order from the chief, and he repeated it to the others. Without any appearance of concerted action, the torchmen began to edge themselves in both directions toward the far side of the rock, until the near side was almost in total darkness.

Then Caswallon took the reins without a word to Tros, and the man with the spear spoke to Commius the Gaul, who climbed into another chariot. The horses began to plunge, but Caswallon pulled them backward, edging the chariot gradually into deeper shadow.

Two other chariots followed suit; and in one there was a woman, who drove, and who had magnificent brown hair that reached below her waist. Conops jumped in and, curling on the floor, made ready to cling to Tros's knee in case of need; being a seaman, he had no love and less experience of chariots.

Suddenly Caswallon wheeled his team and sent it at full gallop toward the end of the lane that led into the forest. She who drove the second chariot wheeled after him; and a third, in which Commius the Gaul was clinging, bumped over the rotting tree-roots in the wake.

The pace, once the horses sprang into their stride, was furious. Tros, forever mindful of his dignity, clung nevertheless to the chariot side, setting his teeth as the wheels struck ruts and branches, feeling as if the dimly seen milk-white of the horses were foaming waves, and himself in a ship's bow on the lookout for unknown rocks.

They plunged into the forest, where the oaks met overhead. There was a sound, that might have been the sea, of wind in the upper branches—a sensation of tremendous speed—and nothing visible except the sudden-looming tree-trunks, which seemed to miss the wheel by hair's breadths.

There was a thudding of wheels and a thunder of pursuing hoofs, a splash now and then where shallow water lay in unseen hollows, a smell of horse-sweat, and of rotting leaves, and a whirring of unseen bats. One bat struck Tros in the face, and fell to the floor of the chariot, where Conops drew his knife and slew it—believing then, and forever afterwards, that he had killed a devil.

The horses appeared to be frantic and out of hand, and yet Caswallon managed them with art that concealed all method, standing with one foot resting on a sort of step, no more than feeling at the horses' mouths, balancing his weight as if by instinct in advance of sudden turns and low obstructions that the horses took in their stride, but that threw the chariot a yard in air.

Long—endless to Tros—darkness, and then moonlight silhouetting ghostly tree-trunks, a splash through a shadowy ford, then through a mile of stumps and seedlings at the forest's edge into a belt of fern and lush grass glistening with dew, and at last a rolling down, where patches of chalk gleamed milk-white under the moon and the track swung around a hillside under a scattering of fleecy clouds.

Then Caswallon glanced at Tros, and Tros forced a good-natured grin:

"O Chief," he said, "you are the first who has made me feel that kind of fear!"

Caswallon smiled, but the ends of his long moustache concealed what kind of smile it was. Instead of answering he glanced over his shoulder at the second chariot, not fifty yards behind. There was a woman driving it.

Then, with one swift look into Tros's eyes, he shook the reins and shouted to the team—a trumpet shout, that held a sort of note of laughter, but not of mockery to which a guest could take exception. He seemed pleased to have shown his prowess to a foreigner, that was all.

CHAPTER IV

FFLUR

Mark my words, ye who are deceived and undone and betrayed by women; ye who fight each other for a woman's favors; ye who value women by the numbers and strength of their sons, and by their labor at the loom. Lo, I tell you a secret. There is laughter in the eyes of some—aye, even within their anger, and beneath it. Those are the wise ones and the worthy. They are not ambitious. They know ambition is the yoke-mate of treachery. They will not betray themselves. How then can they betray another?

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Wolves worrying a kill yelped and vanished into shadow as the chariot thundered around a shoulder of the down and passed a cluster of low, flint-and-mud-built cottages with wooden roofs, surrounded by a wall, within which was bleating and the stifling smell of sheep.

Beyond that the moonlight shone on a big thatched house surrounded by a wooden paling. It was high and oblong, but of only one story with projecting eaves, built of wooden beams with flints and chalk packed into the interstices. Light shone through the chinks of the shutters. There were no trees near it.

They were expected, for a gate was flung wide at the sound of their approach and a dozen men with spears and shields formed up in line outside the entrance, raising their spears as Caswallon drove full-gallop past them.

Within the paling there was a smell of horses that stamped and whinnied at their pickets under a lean-to roof. The house door opened, showing a blazing fire on a hearth exactly facing it. Caswallon drew the team up on its haunches, and almost before their forefeet touched the ground again he let go the reins, jumped along the chariot pole, touched it lightly once with one foot, and seized their heads.*

Six women stood in the doorway, with three children clinging to their skirts.

Some one with dark, shaggy hair, who wore nothing but a wolfskin, led away the horses just in time to avoid the second chariot that thundered through the gate and drew up as the first had done.

And, as the horses pawed the air, the woman who was driving dropped the reins and exactly repeated Caswallon's feat, springing along the pole to the ground to seize their heads. There was no sign yet of the third chariot and Commius. A man stepped out behind the chariot the woman had been driving and held the horses until another man dressed in skins came and led them away.

"O Tros, this is Fflur. She is my wife," said Caswallon, taking her by the hand.

She stepped forward and kissed Tros on both cheeks, then stepped back to her husband's side, and Tros wondered at her, for she was good to look at—strong, modest, matronly, gray-eyed, and dressed in embroidered woolen stuff, with a bodice of laced leather that showed the outlines of her graceful figure. There were pearls in her hair and in the big round brooches on her dress.

It was she who led the way into the house, scolding the dogs, throwing an arm about one of the women in the doorway, asking why the children were not asleep in bed—a very gracious lady, full of dignity and laughter and sincerity.

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* This was a favorite trick of the Britons in battle.

"This is not my house," said Caswallon, taking Tros by the arm. "I am the chief. They pay me tribute from the fen-land to the sea. It is a good kingdom. You shall tell me about Cæsar."

He did not wait for Commius' chariot but followed his wife into the house and shut the door behind him, pushing away the dogs, rolling one of them over playfully with his foot—then tasting a tankard of mead that his wife took from a woman's hand and brought to him.

He only sipped, then handed the tankard to Tros, who drank the half of it and passed it back. Caswallon swallowed the remainder, gave the empty tankard to a woman, wiped his wet moustache on a woolen towel that the woman passed to him, smiled and handed the towel to Tros.

"So one of us clove your chin? Was it a good blow?" he asked, laying a big white hand with rings on it on Tros's shoulder.

"No. A blow in haste," said Tros. "He was not strong."

"He is very strong. His name is Erbin. He can throw a good-sized bullock by the horns. You broke his ribs," said Caswallon. "Can you break mine?"

"I *will* not," Tros answered.

Caswallon laughed, half-disappointed, wholly admiring Tros's strength, flexing his own great shoulder-muscles as he led to where two high-backed oaken seats faced each other on opposite sides of the hearth.

He threw himself on one, shoving the dogs away as he thrust his skin-clad legs toward the fire, signing to Tros to take the other.

Then he unbuckled his long sword, and Tros followed suit, each man setting his weapon against the wall. Conops sat down on the floor beside the hearth, within reach of Tros's legs, and a woman brought him a tankard of mead all to himself.

It was a high, oblong room, with great black beams overhead, from which hams and sides of bacon hung in the smoke that rose from the hearth and lost itself up in the shadows below the thatch. There was no light except from the fire, but one of the women prodded that to keep it blazing, and when she disappeared Conops assumed the duty.

Three sleepy children, two boys and a girl, came and clung to Caswallon's legs, begging him to tell them stories, but after he had tousled up their hair and rolled one of them on the floor among the dogs, he dismissed them, calling to one of the women to make them go to bed.

His wife Fflur was already busy with her women in another room; there was a clattering of dishes.

"And Cæsar?" said Caswallon. "I am told you know him? We can talk here."

He leaned against the back of the seat with his hands on his knees and looked at Tros confidently. His was the gift good breeding produces, of putting a guest mentally at ease. He spoke as to an equal, without any fuss of dignity.

"Has Commius not told you?" Tros asked, and Caswallon nodded.

"Commius also is a guest," he remarked. "But the chariot in which he rides will come more slowly. I ordered it."

"Commius," said Tros, "owes his life and his wealth to Cæsar. If I know anything of men, then Commius hates Cæsar, but is thinking of the Atrebates and the other Gauls. If Cæsar should invade this island, Commius might persuade the Gauls to rise behind him. If that is not his plan, at least he thinks of it.

"He is a Gaul at heart, but afraid for his own skin and his own possessions. He does not dare speak openly, lest some one should betray his speech to Cæsar. Commius is a watchful and secretive man. He will stop at nothing to help the Gauls, provided he can save his own skin."

Caswallon nodded.

"And you?" he asked. "Did not Cæsar send you?"

"My father is a hostage in Cæsar's camp. I was to show the coast and the harbors to Caius Volusenus. I risk my own life and my father's; but I warn you to oppose Cæsar—to resist his landing in all ways possible."

"Why do you do that?" asked Caswallon. "If you were my own brother, or my wife's son, I could understand it. But you are neither a Briton nor a Gaul."

"Ask the druids," Tros answered. "They will tell you, if they see fit."

"You are a kind of druid?"

"No," said Tros.

"Perhaps you are a greater than a druid?"

"If you speak of my father—yes. As for me, I am young. Most of my life I have spent voyaging. In that way a man learns one thing, but not another. I am not deep in the Mysteries, but my father Perseus is a Prince of Samothrace."

Caswallon nodded again, but did not pretend to understand more than vaguely.

"I have heard of the Mysteries of Samothrace," he said respectfully. "I am a king. The druids say I am a good enough one. If Cæsar wants my kingdom, he must fight for it. I have said so to Commius."

"Have you quarreled with Commius?" asked Tros.

"No. He is my guest. He brought presents from Cæsar, a lot of trash that the women laughed at. I will send him back to Cæsar with some valuable gifts, to show him how a king is generous."

"Thus whetting Cæsar's appetite!" said Tros drily. "If you send a gift like that to Cæsar, lay your plans well, Caswallon. Good enough, if you bait an ambush for the Roman wolf. Be ready for him, that is all! Be sure what you are doing!"

The humorous, middle-aged-boyish face of Caswallon began to look puzzled. He was plainly meditating a blunt question, and yet too polite to ask it.

"Some men seek revenge, some fame, some riches, some authority," he said at last, twisting at his long moustache. "All men whom I ever met sought something for themselves."

Whereat Tros grinned.

"I seek to keep my father's good opinion and to earn the praise of Those who sent me into Gaul," he answered.

"Nothing else?" asked Caswallon, watching his face steadily.

"I need a ship."

"I have ships."

"So has Cæsar. Big ones, that can out-fight yours."

Caswallon pushed a dog out of the way and stirred the fire with his foot.

"Do you propose to help me against Cæsar if I offer you a ship?" he asked, looking at Tros sideways, suddenly.

"No," said Tros. "I swear no oaths. I make no bargains. I will help you if I can, and freely. It is Cæsar who owes me a ship, having burnt mine. If a day comes when I think you owe me anything, I will demand it of you."

"You will demand a ship of Cæsar?"

Tros laughed. "As well demand a fat lamb of a wolf! But you are not Cæsar. I would ask a debt of you, and you would pay it."

"If I thought I owed it, yes," said Caswallon. It was evident that he liked Tros finely. "I will give you a ship now, if you have need of it."

But Tros shook his head.

"What is the matter with my ships?" Caswallon asked him. There was challenge in his voice.

"You forget. My father is a hostage. I must set him free before I play my own hand."

"Yes. A man should do that. You want me to help you set your father free?" asked Caswallon, lowering his eyebrows. "How could I do that? My men would laugh at me, if I talked of invading Gaul! The druids would forbid it. Fflur would say no to it. Besides, I have never seen your father. Has he a claim on me?"

"No claim," Tros answered. "None. But Cæsar says he has a claim against you."

"He lies!" remarked Caswallon.

He himself did not look like a man who dealt in lies.

"And he will invade your island to levy tribute."

"It is I who levy tribute here!" Caswallon said slowly, scratching a dog's back with his foot.

He stared at the fire for about a minute, frowning.

"If you resolve to oppose Cæsar, will your men obey you?" wondered Tros.

"They have had to hitherto. I am the chief. There have been a few disputes, but I am more the chief than ever," he answered.

"Are you overconfident?" asked Tros. "Cæsar's method is to send his spies who promise big rewards and make atrocious threats, thus undermining a chief's authority."

"I have kept close watch on Commius."

"No doubt you have," said Tros. "Nevertheless, this night a woman offered me your kingdom if I would play Cæsar's game with her."

At that Caswallon suddenly threw off his thoughtful mood and laughed boisterously, hugely, spanking both knees with his hands so thunderously that the dogs yelped and Fflur came in with her wrists all white with meal to learn what the joke might be.

"Fflur—hah-hah-ho-ho-hoh!—yah-ha-ha-hah! Fflur, have you heard the latest? Britomaris' wife offers our kingdom to this man! What do you think of that?"

"I mentioned no name," said Tros.

"No! Hah-ha-ha-ho-hoh! That is a good one. Haw-haw-hah-hah-hoh! She hasn't a name *worth* mentioning! Hah-hah-hah! What say you, Fflur? Shall I put her in a sack and send her for a gift to Cæsar?"

"You know she is dangerous," his wife answered.

"She!" laughed Caswallon. "If she had a man like Tros here, she might be dangerous, but not with Britomaris! And if she were truly dangerous, she would have poisoned both of us—oh, years ago! I will let her try her blandishments on Cæsar."

"You are always overconfident," said Fflur, and left the room again, adding over her shoulder, "it is only thanks to me you are not poisoned."

Caswallon chuckled amiably to himself and shouted for some more mead. A woman brought two tankards full, and, as if it were a joke, he made her taste from both of them.

"She lives!" he laughed. "Tros, at the first sign of a bellyache call Fflur, who will give you stuff to make you vomit."

Tros laughed and drank quickly, for he was anxious to have more serious speech before Commius should arrive.

"Cæsar prepares a fleet and plans to sail for the coast of Britain before the equinox," he said abruptly.

Caswallon stiffened himself.

"How many men can he muster?"

"Many. But he has not ships enough for all, and he must also hold down the Gauls, who hate him. I think he will come with two legions, and perhaps five hundred cavalry."

"I laugh!" said Caswallon. "I will gather dogs enough to worry his two legions! Nay, the sheep shall chase him out of Britain!"

"Your lips laugh," said Tros, "but your eyes are thoughtful. My face is sober, but I laugh within. A deep plan pleases me. You have ships, but how big are they? And have you sailors for them?"

"I have three longships," said Caswallon, "that are rowed by twenty men, and each can carry fifty. Now and then they go a-fishing, so the crews are always ready. But do you think I will fight Cæsar on the sea? Not I! I went to sea once, as far as Gaul, and I vomited worse than Fflur makes me when she thinks I have been poisoned! I will fight Cæsar on dry land!"

"Where Cæsar will defeat you unless heaven intervenes!" said Tros grimly. "However, you could not fight Cæsar with three ships. Where are the ships?"

"In the river,* by the marsh edge, well hidden from the North Sea rovers."

"Could you send those ships, unknown to any one but you, around the coast, to a point that you and I will choose as the most dangerous landing place for Cæsar, and hide them near by at my disposal?"

Caswallon nodded, but the nod was noncommittal, not a promise.

"It is a long way by sea," he said slowly, as if he doubted that such a plan was feasible.

"Because, if you will do that," said Tros, "and if the crews of your three ships obey me, I believe I can wreck the whole of Cæsar's fleet and leave him at your mercy on the beach with his two legions. I can do it! I can do it! If I can only find a man who knows the tides."

"Ah!"

Caswallon sat bolt upright. Then he summoned his wife with a shout that made the dogs wake up and bark. She came and sat down on the seat beside him, her jewels gleaming in the firelight, but not more brilliantly than her eyes.

"I like this man. I like his speech," said Caswallon.

"He is good," said Fflur, looking straight at Tros. "But he will not obey you. He has the eyes of a druid and a brow that is harder than bronze. He will never be a king, because none can serve themselves and make him take the blame. Nor will he ever be a slave, for none can tame him.

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* The Thames—which was always *the* river.

"He is like the wind that blows; if he blows your way, you may use him. He will tell no lies. He never thinks of treachery. But if he blows away from you, you can neither hold him nor call him back."

"So, Tros, now you know yourself," said Caswallon. "Fflur is always right."

Tros smiled, his lion's eyes half closing.

"I would like to know what she says of Commius," he answered.

"She says that he will surely betray me."

"If you let him," Fflur added.

"Mother of my sons, I will not let him!"

Tros smiled within himself and Fflur saw the change in his expression. She was very lovely when her gray eyes shone with hidden laughter. Suddenly, as if ashamed of a moment's mood, she put an arm around her husband's shoulder and nestled close to him.

"What is it I should hear?" she asked.

Tros repeated what he had said to Caswallon about the ships, and Fflur listened with her eyes closed. Her husband signaled to Tros to wait in silence for her answer. She sat quite still, with her head against the woodwork, hardly breathing.

"I see blood," she said at last, shuddering. She was not seeing with her eyes, for they were shut. "I see men slain—and doubts—and a disaster. But there is brightness at the farther side of it, and a year, or longer, but I think a year—and then more blood; and I do not quite see the end of that.

"There is another way than this one you propose, but it would lead to failure because of rivalry. This way is the best, because it gives the victor's crown to no man, yet it will succeed. But you—"

She opened her eyes slowly and looked straight at Tros.

"You will suffer. You will not return to Samothrace, although you will attempt it. In a way you will be a king, yet not a king, and not on land. More than one woman shall bless the day that you were born, and more than one woman shall hate you; and those that love you will come very near to causing your destruction, whereas those who hate will serve your ends, though you will suffer much at their hands."

Conops stirred by the hearthside, prodding the fire with a charred stick, seeming to thrust at pictures that he saw within the embers. That was the only sound, until Caswallon spoke:

"I envy no man who shall have à kingdom, that is not a kingdom, on the sea. Fflur is always right. If you should suffer too much, Tros, Fflur shall find you a way of relief. I am your friend, and you are welcome."

"After a while he will go away, and he will not come back," said Fflur.

CHAPTER V

A PRINCE OF HOSTS

The Law is simple. There is nothing difficult about it. Why ask me to peer into your souls and say ye are good or evil? Judge ye for yourselves. Ye know your own hearts. Whoever could betray his host or his guest; whoever could misuse hospitality by treacherous betrayal of the secrets learned beneath a hospitable roof, that one is lower than any animal, he is capable of all treasons; he is vile, and virtue is not in him. He to whom hospitality is genuinely sacred, whom torture could not compel to yield the secrets learned by hearth and broken bread and mead, that one has manhood. He is capable of all the other virtues. He will be a god when his lives on the earth are finished.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

There was a great shout at the gate and a thudding of hoofs on soft earth. The dogs awoke and barked with glaring eyes and their hair on end, as the other chariot brought Commius the Gaul. Some one struck the door three times with a sword-hilt and opened it.

In strode Commius with his cloak across the lower portion of his face, and paused a moment, blinking at the firelight. He seemed annoyed at the sight of Tros, but let his cloak fall and contrived to smile.

He was followed into the room by all the armed men who had been standing at the gate; they stacked their weapons in a corner after lifting their right hands one by one in salute to Caswallon.

"So this is your palace?" said Commius, glancing about him and assuming admiration.

Caswallon laughed.

"This is where we will eat and rest," he answered. "This belongs to Britomaris and Gwenhwyfar. Since they can not speak to me civilly, but pay me tribute nonetheless, they play the host from far off. They always go when I announce my coming. After I have gone, they say I stole the furniture! Yet they accept the gifts I leave. Be seated."

"Where *is* your palace?" Commius asked, taking the seat beside Tros after bowing with grave dignity.

"I have none," said Caswallon. "I have a home that Fflur keeps, where I give judgment."

"Where?" asked Commius, but Caswallon did not answer.

For excuse he found fault with the men, who were carrying in a long table and arranging it on trestles opposite the hearth. They worked clumsily, being evidently men of rank, not far below the chief himself in station, laughing when the women made fun of them.

When the table was set, and a heavy cloth laid on it, they dragged up a bench before the hearth and as many as could sat down on it, while the others sprawled on the floor between their legs.

Two of them were short and swarthy, but the others were tall, with long hair carefully combed and oiled; one man's hair was golden, and another's like spun flax. Not one but wore beautifully made brooches, and their arms were all covered with devices painted on with blue woad; they wore woolen breeches, and their legs were enclosed in leather stockings, cross-gartered to the thigh. Clean men, all of them, and courteously dignified, but thirsty and not at all retiring.

"Mead!" they shouted. "Where is the mead?"

And the women brought it in great brimming tankards.

They pledged the health of Fflur and of Caswallon; then, sending the tankards back to be refilled, they drank to Tros and to Commius, courteously wishing them a dozen sons apiece:

"Which will keep the good-wife busy," as one of them remarked.

"Aye," said another, "a childless woman is a restless curse, so drink we to the midwife! If there were a son or two to this house, Britomaris would have more reason to call his wife his own! Hah-hah-hah-hah! Guest Tros, they saw thee track Gwenhwyfar to the herdsman's house—so says the charioteer who just brought Commius. Does he lie? Nay, out with it! All know her."

"They know more than I, then," Tros answered, and Fflur glanced approval. "My man Conops here attended that tryst. Let him answer for me."

"He has but one eye! Hah-hah-hah! A dozen pairs of eyes can watch Gwenhwyfar, and she will give them all the slip! Ho! Caswallon, what say you to it?"

"That you lack manners!" Caswallon answered. "I can throw the man who insults my guest as far as from here to the paling. This is Tros, who broke the ribs of Erbin. If I give him leave, he can break thine."

"Oh, well, I will save my ribs for another purpose. Let him have Gwenhwyfar! Whoever takes her from Britomaris does us all a service, for he will kill her very soon when he has found her out! And besides, without her Britomaris might become a man! Ho! I drink to the Lord Tros of the yellow eyes, who stole his shoulders from an oak tree, and who keeps a one-eyed servant lest the fellow see all that is happening in herdsmen's houses!"

"Ho-hah-hah-hah!" they chorused, and drank deep.

The women had to leave off loading food on to the table, to fill up their tankards, and they made so much noise that the children woke up and had to be bundled back to bed again behind a painted ox-hide curtain that cut off the far end of the room.

Then the meal was declared ready and they all fell to, Fflur sitting on the chief's right hand and Tros on his left hand, next to Commius, the other women serving and the dogs alert for bones or anything that anybody threw; for they cut the meat with their daggers, and tossed to the floor whatever they did not care to chew. There was a thunderstorm of growling underfoot and dog-fights most of the time, but no one took much notice, except to kick occasionally when the fighting was uncomfortably close.

There was bread, beef, mutton, pork, butter and cheese, onions, and a sort of cabbage boiled in milk, but no other vegetables. Conops received his food on a bench beside the hearth, and the women helped him to enough for three men. The Britons ate too steadfastly to do much talking, but Tros, possessing the Mediterranean temperament, had time for speech between the mouthfuls, and Commius had no appetite; so they exchanged words.

"Did Gwenhwyfar speak of me?" asked Commius.

"Aye, and of Cæsar."

A long pause, during which Tros listened to such sporadic conversation as passed between the Britons—mainly about horses and the scarcity of deer. One man, with his mouth full, urged Caswallon to summon all the able-bodied men to a wolf hunt.

"I will lead you to a wolf hunt soon enough," said Caswallon. "I will give you your bellyfull of wolves."

Then:

"When do you return to Cæsar?" Commius asked.

"Soon," said Tros.

"You return with Caius Volusenus?"

"If he waits for me."

Caswallon did not appear to catch that conversation, but Fflur was watching Commius intently, and it may have been that second-sight involved the corollary of second-hearing. She glanced at her husband, making no remark, but he read some sort of warning in her eyes and nodded, looking then steadily during three slow breaths at Commius, slightly lowering his eyelids. Fflur appeared satisfied.

A moment later Caswallon left the table, muttering something about seeing whether the serfs were being fed. He strode outside and slammed the door behind him.

"He is forever thinking of the serfs," said Fflur. "That is why he is a great chief and none can overthrow him. Some of you think more of horses than of men and more of hunting than of other people's rights. And some of you are very clever"—she looked at Commius again—"but your chief is wiser than you all."

To please her, they began telling stories of Caswallon, pledging him in tankards full of mead as they recalled incident after incident, adding those imaginative touches that time lends to the deeds of heroes, until, if one had believed them, or even they had believed themselves, Caswallon would have seemed not much less than divine. He was a long time absent, and the glamour of him grew each minute.

Commius took advantage of the roars of laughter—as one man told how the chief had trapped a Norseman's ship that came a-raiding up the Thames, and how he had killed the pirate and enslaved the crew—to resume a conversation in low tones with Tros.

"I pledge you to keep this secret," he began.

But Tros was a man who made no rash pledges, so he held his peace.

"Do you hear me?" asked Commius. "Cæsar has a high opinion of me, and I of you. I trust you. I am minded to warn Cæsar that he will prod a wasps' nest if he sails for Britain. I have seen and heard enough. I will advise against invasion."

Tros's amber eyes observed the Gaul's face thoughtfully. He nodded, saying nothing, and helped himself to gravy, mopping it up with bread from the dish in front of him.

Commius waited for another roar of laughter, and resumed:

"I must go in haste to Cæsar. One of us should stay here. If I could say to Cæsar I have left you here to watch events and to spy out the strength and weakness, he would excuse the haste of my return. If you permit me to return with Caius Volusenus in your place, I will use my influence to set your father free."

Tros kept silence, munching steadily. After a minute Commius nudged him, and their eyes met.

"You agree?" he asked. "I pledge myself to set your father free, and to warn Cæsar not to invade Britain."

"If you heard a man warn the winter not to come; and if you heard him promise to pull Cæsar's teeth, how much of it would you believe?" asked Tros.

"Then you prefer not to trust me?"

"Oh, I trust you. A man is what he is. I trust you to work for Commius. But if I should trust you with my father's life, I should be a worse fool than even you suppose."

Commius' face darkened.

"I have influence with Cæsar," he said grimly.

"And I none," Tros answered. "Yet I will play a bolder hand than yours against him. Each to his own way, Commius!"

"Remember, I pledged you to secrecy!" the Gaul retorted.

"Hah! When you have my pledge, you may depend on me," said Tros. "My tongue is mine!"

Commius' eyes glittered coldly.

"I have seen men with their tongues torn out for saying less than you have said," he answered.

Caswallon entered, standing for a moment with the moonlight at his back, until they yelled to him to shut the door and keep the bats out. He strode to the fire and threw a faggot on. His eyes looked full of laughter.

"Commius," he said, "I go north in the morning. Will you come with me?"

"I have a boil," said Commius. "It irks me to ride in chariots; and I would as soon die now as try to sit a horse before the boil is healed."

Caswallon had to turn his back to hide some sort of emotion.

"You must be my guest then in my absence," he said over his shoulder.

"You are a prince of hosts," Commius answered, bowing and smiling leanly.

"Then when I return after two or three days, I will find you here?"

"By all means," said Commius.

There was a gleam of something like excitement in his eyes.

"You know this is Britomaris' house," Caswallon went on. "I have sent word to him that I shall leave at dawn. He and his wife Gwenhwyfar will be here soon after daybreak."

Commius was breathing very slowly. Almost the only sound came from a dog that cracked a bone under the table.

"Is my meaning clear to you?" Caswallon asked. "Britomaris pays tribute, but he is not my friend. You say you are my friend."

"Never doubt it. I am proud to be," said Commius.

"And you are my guest—here—wherever I may be. Britomaris will try to plot with you against me. Will you be for me, or for Britomaris—and Gwenhwyfar?"

"Over and above all laws is that of hospitality," said Commius without a moment's hesitation. "Even if my sympathy were not yours, as I think you know it is, I must nevertheless uphold you while I am your guest."

"Good," said Caswallon, turning with his back to the hearth and his hands behind him, legs well apart to avoid a dog that had taken sanctuary between his feet to gnaw a bone in safety. "I call you all to witness how I trust our friend, Lord Commius. I bid you all to trust him in like manner—exactly in like manner."

Commius stood up and bowed, and the men who sat at table murmured his name politely, raising their tankards to drink to him. But their eyes were on their chief, although no sign that a stranger could have noticed passed between them. Two or three times Commius looked as if about to speak, but he thought better of it, and it was Tros who spoke next:

"I am weary. Do the Britons never sleep?"

"I had forgotten that," said Caswallon. "Aye, we had better sleep. Do we? We are the soundest sleepers this side of the grave! But Lud pity those who sleep a minute later than I do in the morning, for I will prod them out o' blanket with a spear point! So away with all the kitchen-stuff, and one last drink!"

The women cleared away the dishes and the cloth, but left the table, for two men needed that to sleep on. The others laid their blankets on the floor, quarreling a little as to who had precedence.

Tros received two huge blankets and a pillow from Fflur, who led him and Conops to an inner room where she kissed him good night.

"Is your man with that one eye watchful?" she asked.

"Better than a dog!" said Tros.

"Bid him guard you against Commius. The Gaul will lie on the fireside seat in the outer room, but the others will sleep like dead men. I know murder when I see it in a man's eyes. Be sure he means to kill you one way or another. He believes you know too much about him."

"I fear no knife of his," said Tros.

"Yet you fear," she answered. "What is it?"

"I fear lest he will run to Caius Volusenus, and cross to Gaul, telling Cæsar I have joined with your husband. I fear for my father's life. Commius would sell me and my father, and another dozen like us, for a pat on the back from Cæsar."

"You need not fear," she answered. "Caswallon is awake. Commius will not return to Gaul—not yet. But be on guard against his knife, if he ever suspects that we suspect him."

She spread Tros's bed for him with her own hands, and called to one of the women to bring a pile of fleeces for Conops, bidding him spread them before the door as soon as it was shut.

"So you may both sleep," she said, smiling, "and if one tries to open in the night he must awaken Conops. Can you shout loud?" she asked.

"Aye, like a sailor!" Conops assured her with a nod.

"Shout then, and at the first alarm; and if the intruder takes flight, go to sleep again. Let there be no slaying in my house."

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNING A BOIL AND COMMIUS

It is wiser to take a liar at his word and oblige him to eat his lies, than to denounce him and too soon expose his enmity. It is wiser to seem to believe than to boast of your unbelief. Lies, like the moles, can burrow faster than ye dig. It is wiser to let them creep into the open.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

ALMOST the next that Tros knew, day was breaking through the shutter chinks and there was a great row in the outer room—shouts, oaths and laughter. Caswallon was keeping his promise to rouse late sleepers with a spear point. Dog barks and the high-pitched laugh of children added to the din. The table upset with a crash. A dog yelped. Then there came a succession of grunts and thuds as one man after another was thrown, laughing and protesting, through the front door.

"Are we all awake?" cried Caswallon. "Come and wrestle with me, Tros! Let us see if your back is stronger than I can break!"

So Tros rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and went and wrestled with him on the dew-soaked grass before the door, two dozen men admiring; for the horse-grooms and the herdsmen came and looked on, laughing like lunatics and offering to bet their freedom on the British chief.

But neither had the best of it, and they were locked in a grunting knot of arms and legs when Fflur came and summoned them to breakfast. Caswallon's oldest son, aged sixteen, promised on his honor to break Tros's neck the moment he was old enough.

"Gods! But he will have to fight a man!" laughed Caswallon, rubbing his woad-stained skin. "Yours is a neck worth breaking, Tros!"

They washed in tubs of water that the women set outside the door, combed their hair carefully, and went in to the business of eating, which was serious, devotional and too faithfully performed to allow much conversation. Commius, making notes on tablets, which he thrust cautiously into his bosom, was the last to the table and the first to use his mouth for anything but eating:

"You Britons," he said, "are you irreligious nowadays? In Gaul, our people all worship at sunrise. That is the first act of the day."

"Before strangers?" asked Caswallon. "No wonder the Romans have subdued you."

"What can the observance of religion have to do with that?" asked Commius.

"All," said Caswallon, "everything. If an enemy learns your thoughts, he is a fool if he can't throw you down and pin you under him. Religion not kept secret is weakness. Tell me *my* thoughts, Commius!"

Tros chuckled. Commius assumed the vaguely pained look of a financier who discovers that some one knows as much as he does. Caswallon studying him shrewdly between mouthfuls, which he washed down with beakers of warm milk, proceeded to amuse himself.

"You tell me you have a boil. Then I know where to kick you, don't I?"

"Would you kick your guest?" asked Commius.

"No," said Caswallon, "and I would kill the man who did. But let us suppose you were my secret enemy; for I have met such men, who spoke me fair and did me evil when my back was turned.

"Let us suppose *you* were my secret enemy. I know you have a boil. What would be easier than to lance that boil for you, and to put a little gangrene on the knife? You see, two can play at being secret enemies!

"It is just so with religion, which is why the druids keep it secret, and why we practise it in secret, and why Cæsar hates the druids, and why I like them. Cæsar never conquered Gaul until he slew the druids first. He will never conquer me, because he does not know my thoughts. Tell me my true thoughts, Commius!"

But before Commius could answer, Fflur put a word in:

"Ah! But what if the boil were feigned?"

She did not look at Commius; she was putting salt on an enormous skillet-full of fried eggs that one of the women had brought for her inspection.

"If the boil were feigned," said Caswallon. "Bah! What fool would pretend to have a boil? The truth would be too easy to discover. A dangerous man would pretend to have the toothache, or the bellyache. We risk offending the honorable Commius if we carry such a theme too far. And by the way, Commius, shall I send for a druid to come and make you easier? They are very clever with their little knives."

"No," Commius answered. "It will burst soon of its own accord."

Followed boasting with excruciating details, by a man who claimed that he had ridden from Cair Lunden all the way to Pevensey, with boils so bad that, although he was weak with pain, a horse could not throw him because he had stuck to the saddle.

And that naturally led to rival reminiscences, including one by Tros, concerning a man who grew such calluses from friction on a rower's bench that when he was ashore, running away from King Ptolemy's press-gang, six arrows stuck into him like feathers in a bird's tail without his even knowing it.

So breakfast broke up in a storm of anecdotes, not all of them polite, and Commius was able to avoid attention to himself by simply keeping silence.

Then there was a clatter of hoofs and wheels outside, and a dozen serfs entered to carry out the bedding and other luggage, while Caswallon and his friends went outside to inspect the horses.

There were ten magnificent gray and white teams yoked to chariots, whose sides were built of wickerwork and wheels of bronze; and there were twelve more horses for the escort, mostly stallions, squealing and rearing with excitement.

Caswallon mounted a gray stallion and put him through his paces while the luggage chariots were being loaded, exhibiting such horsemanship as made the sea-wise Tros gasp, until the owner of the horse complained that there would be no strength left in the animal and Caswallon, jumping the horse over a chariot, vaulted to the ground beside him.

There was very little leave-taking from Commius, who stood in the door and bowed his pleasantest, pretending he was sorry not to make the journey with them. The only man he had much conversation with was Conops, to whom he gave a gold coin surreptitiously; but Conops, thanking him effusively, displayed it in his right palm so that Tros and the rest might see and draw their own conclusions.

Fflur did not kiss Commius, although from the hostess a kiss was customary. Caswallon shook him by the hand, signing to his wife and children and the other women to make haste into the chariots. His last remark sounded almost like a warning:

"Remember, Commius; you are my guest. Britomaris and Gwenhwyfar pay me tribute. They are not my friends."

Then they were off, with Tros up beside Caswallon and Conops on the floor, bracing his feet against the chariot's wicker sides that squeaked as Caswallon wheeled the team and sent it headlong at the open gate, with dogs barking, serfs shouting, the rattle and thump of the other chariots wheeling into column one by one, and then the thunder of the hoofs of the escort kicking up the dust a hundred yards behind.

For a long while Caswallon drove as if driving were life's one employment and speed the apex of desire, stooping to watch how the horses placed their feet. He never once glanced back at Fflur, who drove her own chariot with equal skill, her long hair flowing like a banner in the morning breeze and the heads of three children bobbing up and down beside her. At last he eased the pace a little and glanced at Tros sidewise, smiling:

"There will be fun with Commius," he remarked. "I like to see a fox caught in a trap. He will plot with Britomaris, who does exactly what Gwenhwyfar tells him, as long as she is there to make him do it. That will be treachery, he being my guest. Some men of mine, and a druid, will pick a quarrel with him. He having been my guest, they will spare his life. Alive, I can use him. He is no good dead. And they will spare Britomaris and Gwenhwyfar because I have so ordered it, for I can use them also.

"But they will fasten the fetters on Commius, and the druid will look for the boil, since it is his duty to attend to that. Finding none—the fool should have bethought him of a bellyache—the druid will denounce him as a liar. We have failings, but there is this about us Britons: When we have proved a man a liar, we disbelieve whatever else he says. Thus the harm that Commius has done by too much talking when he thought my back was turned will be undone."

"I see you work craftily," Tros observed.

"A man must, if he proposes to remain a king," said Caswallon. "Kingship is the first of all the crafts. This Cæsar who has conquered Gaul is bold and treacherous and fortunate and rather clever; but is he crafty?"

"Very," Tros answered. "If kinging is a craft, he is the master craftsman of them all."

"Has he a Fflur?"

"No. Women are his tools, or an amusement."

"Then I will beat him!" said Caswallon.

And at last he looked back at his wife, who laughed and waved a hand to him.

"You owe your life to Fflur," he remarked. "You sleep deep, friend Tros, and with the shutter off the thong—a compliment to me, no doubt, but dangerous! Commius stirred three times. Twice he was at your window. He carries poison with him, which he bought from a woman near the seashore where he landed when he first came. One drop on a man's lips in the night—"

"Who watched him?"

"Fflur heard him and she roused me. So it happened there were two kings at your window in the night—and twice!—each lying to the other as to how he came to be there! We agreed that from that spot there was the best view of the moon's eclipse, and that the cry of a strange night-bird had awakened both of us."

"There is no reason why Commius should fear me," said Tros. "I am not *his* enemy."

"There is no reason why Gwenhwyfar should fear me, and I am not *her* enemy," Caswallon answered. "But, man or woman, it is all one when they plan treachery. They are like a wolf then. None can say why they pursue this victim and not that one.

"But perhaps it would have suited Commius to have it said I poisoned you. You were sent by Cæsar, Tros. Thus Cæsar would have a plausible excuse for quarrel with me. But let us hear what the one-eyed fellow says."

Conops exhibited the gold coin, tossed it in air and missed it as the chariot bumped a hillock. They had to stop to let him recover it, and the escort galloped up full pelt to find out what was wrong.

"He said," Conops remarked when they were under way again, and he spat on the coin and polished it, "he said, if I should remember to tell him at the earliest moment all that is said and all that is done while my master is out of his sight, he for his part will remember to advance my cause with Cæsar, who has many lucrative employments in his gift."

Tros laughed. Caswallon glanced down at Conops half-a-dozen times.

"I will buy that man from you," he said at last. "How much in gold will you take for him? Or shall I swap you three for one?"

"He is a free man," Tros answered.

"Oh. Then I would kill him if he offered to change masters."

Caswallon lapsed into one of his silent moods, merely waving with his arm occasionally as they skirted mud-and-wattle hamlets, beautifully built, invariably fenced about with heavy tree-trunks, clean and prosperous, but containing no stone buildings and no roofs other than thatch.

There were sheep and cattle everywhere, and great numbers of horses, all carefully watched and guarded against wolves by herdsmen armed with spears; but there was surprisingly little grain, or stubble to show where grain had been, and such as there was, was fenced as heavily as the villages.

The main road seemed to avoid the hamlets purposely, but here and there the villagers seemed to have repaired it, and wherever there was much mud it was rendered passable by tree-trunks felled across it. There were no bridges whatever, but the fords were good and were evidently kept in order.

They changed horses at a village that Caswallon called a town, where a hundred armed men, very variously dressed, lined up to salute the chief in front of a big thatched house with painted mud walls. They saluted him more or less as an equal, calling him and

Fflur by their names and gathering around the chariots when the formal shouting with their spears in air was finished.

The man who owned the house was a long, lean, fox-haired veteran with a naked breast covered with woad designs, whose wife was young enough to be his daughter. But she knew how to play the hostess and to command the village women, who brought out bread and meat and mead for every one, turning the half-hour wait into a picnic.

They all seemed much more impressed with Tros than with Caswallon and wanted to know whether he was one of Cæsar's generals or an ambassador.

But Caswallon warned Tros to keep silence, so he pretended not to understand their speech; instead of talking, he and Conops kissed the girls who carried mead to them, and that started a kissing riot that kept everybody busy, while Caswallon talked in undertones with the red-haired man and the group that stood about him leaning on their spears.

Then Caswallon mounted the rehorsed chariot and addressed the crowd, standing very splendidly and making his voice ring until even the giggling girls grew silent and the children gaped at him.

"Cæsar will not come yet; but he will surely come!" he told them. "Get ye to work and harvest all the corn. Make double store of dried meat. Increase the sheaves of arrows. Mend the chariots, and let no blacksmith put on fat in idleness!

"When the invader comes there shall be a sudden call to arms, but until then, he who wastes time leaning on his spear is a traitor to his wife and children! When Cæsar comes, he will lay waste the land, as he has laid all Gaul waste; he feeds his horses in the standing corn and burns what he does not need. So get ye the harvest in! It will be time enough to lean on spears when I send warning."

The man with red hair showed his teeth and leered with puckered eyes, but Caswallon beckoned him and clapped him on the back, pulling him up into the chariot beside him, bidding him make friends with Tros "who knows Cæsar well."

"Tros, this is Figol, whose grandfather came like you from over the sea, although from another quarter. He is a better man than Britomaris, for he looks like a lean fox but he acts like a fat Briton, whereas Britomaris looks like a Briton but acts like a fox. Figol pays me tribute of all between this forest and where Britomaris' land begins; and the old fox doesn't cheat me more than I permit for the sake of his young wife!"

With that he lifted Figol with one arm and hoisted him over the chariot-side into the crowd, waving him a merry good-by, and was off almost before Conops could scramble into the chariot. They plunged into a forest at the outskirts of the village and drove amid gloomy oaks for leagues on end, with clearings here and there, and well used tracks at intervals on either hand that evidently led to villages.

Caswallon had lapsed into silence again, for a long time studying the new team and then whistling to himself. He seemed to think he was alone, until suddenly he turned to Tros and grinned at him.

"Figol is a fox, but I out-fox him!" he remarked. "If I had let him keep a hundred men at hand, he would have dared me to come and fetch the tribute that is nine months in arrear! He would have talked to them against me, instead of making ready against Cæsar. But now they will get the harvest in, and when they have it I will have my share! We will deal with Cæsar when the time comes."

"When Cæsar does come, you will find he has made all ready in advance," said Tros.

"This is a good kingdom," said Caswallon. "Let Cæsar come, and he shall have a bellyful of fighting for it! But if I should raise an army too soon, they would grow tired of waiting; and first they would race the horses on the downs, and then they would drink all the mead, carousing through the night.

"And after that, because there was no more mead, they would say I was mistaken about Cæsar. Whereafter they would laugh a great deal, and they would all go home. I know my Britons. And when Cæsar came there would be no army.

"Some day you shall see my town, Cair Lunden, and when you have stayed there awhile you will understand how crafty a king must be, if he is to earn—and also get—the tribute money."

"Crafty!" said Tros. "Are you crafty enough to trust me to tell Cæsar that if he comes soon, with a small force, he will find you unprepared?"

"Fflur trusts you. She knows," Caswallon answered. "I never knew her to be wrong in the matter of trusting a man."

CHAPTER VII

GOBHAN AND THE TIDES

Knowledge? Any fool can have it. But wisdom, with which to interpret knowledge and to use it, that is something that each one must learn for himself in the school of existence. It is a mark of the wise man that he can listen to fools and learn from them, although their speech is folly.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE sun had crossed the meridian about two hours before, and they were still cantering through lush, green forest when Tros smelled tidewater and nudged Conops, who smelled it too and grinned. Four of the escort had been cantering behind them for an hour, screening the view down the track to the rear, and it was not until the horsemen maneuvered into single file to avoid a mud hole that Tros knew the other chariots were missing. When he asked where they had disappeared to, Caswallon merely motioned toward the northwest and said:

"Home. Cair Lunden."

"And we?"

"I will show you the longships."

But first they met Gobhan, in a house of logs and mud that overlooked long marshes where the snipe swarmed between the forest and the river Thames. In places the forest crept down almost to the water's edge; and there were creeks innumerable, crowded with wildfowl that filled the air with mournful longshore music. There was another huge forest on the far side, more than two miles away. The river rolled between the mud-flats, lonely and immense, with only one small boat in sight, working its way with oars and sail across the tide.

"Our weakness!" said Caswallon, pulling up the team where the trees ended and they could see the vast expanse of river. "If Cæsar only knew this river he could sail up with his hundred ships and have us at his mercy! The Northmen come now and then, which is why we hide our ships."

There they left the chariot, with the horses nibbling at the trees, and walked, all seven in single file with Caswallon leading, toward the mud-and-log house in the foreground, that stood with its front door almost in the marsh. There was smoke rising from a hole in the wooden roof, but no sign of an inhabitant until they reached the front by a narrow foot-path, and Caswallon shouted:

"Gobhan! Come out there, Gobhan!"

Almost instantly through the door showed a face that made Tros want to laugh, but that rather frightened the four members of the escort. It was comical, and yet immensely dignified, without a single feature that explained the dignity, old beyond calculation, toothless, nearly bald—there was a forehead that mounted so high it resembled a waxen skullcap with a gray-haired tassel on the top—and bearded, but with the beard enclosed in a leather bag and tied back behind the ears. The nose nearly met the chin. There were no eyebrows; a pair of lashless eyes as bright as a weasel's peeped alert and inquisitive from sunken sockets.

"What do you want?" the face asked, mumbling the words because of toothlessness.

Then a body followed the face; lean, scrawny, twisted, suffering apparently from ague caught from the marsh. He was dressed in a long brown smock with a leather apron over it and nothing to proclaim his rank in life except a plaited woolen girdle such as druids wore. He showed no respect for Caswallon, but stood and looked at him, his hands shaking, his hollow cheeks moving as he worked his gums.

"Such a host you are, Gobhan! Such welcome you offer us! Such courtesy!" said Caswallon, striking an attitude.

The ancient addressed as Gobhan grinned at last—if it was a grin that quaked among the wrinkles. He muttered something, shrugged his bony shoulders, turned, and led the way into the house. Caswallon strode in after him and Tros followed; Conops would have followed Tros through a furnace door, whatever his private feelings; but the escort withdrew toward the chariot, expressing strange emotions.

"Wizard!" was a word that one man used; and another one said something about "dirty magic and abominations."

The interior of the house—it had only one room—was almost as remarkable as its owner. There were two truckle-beds at one end, with a table between them and two stools, but the whole of the rest of the interior was given up to furnaces and clay retorts, instruments for measuring, benches piled with jars, mortars, ladles and a work-bench down the middle of the room on which were appliances whose object Tros could not guess. The room was not exactly in confusion, but there was hardly standing room for the three who did not belong there.

Over in a corner a blind man clothed in skins plied an enormous bellows steadily, as if he did it in his sleep. There was the roar of a charcoal furnace and the stench of heated metal, but no sign of anything being made, although there were an anvil and great tongs and hammers near the door.

The owner of the place made no remark but simply waited in front of Caswallon, holding his apron to keep his hands from shaking and constantly moving his toothless gums. He seemed neither afraid, nor yet pleased to see his visitors.

"So now you see Gobhan," said Caswallon. "Look at him! My people wanted to roast him alive in his own furnace for wizardry; but I said no to it, for one reason and another. It cost me quite a quarrel with the younger druids, who proclaimed him an outlaw from their Mysteries, which I daresay is more or less true. And there is trouble now and then because the Northmen come to him, and he will not see the difference between a Briton and a foreigner, but teaches anything he knows to any one who asks him.

"If the druids know more than he does, I will say this: They conceal it! I never could have saved him, if I hadn't thought of using him to trap a longship full of Northmen, who sailed up the Thames to plunder Lunden.

"I sent a man to fall into their hands and tell them about Gobhan; so they turned aside to steal him, meaning to take him to their own country to teach the trick of metal to their shipwrights. And I caught them there, yonder where the creek flows through the rushes.

"We drew a chain across the creek behind them, and they burned their own ship rather than let us capture it, cattle and all; the forehold of the ship was full of bulls. It took three to kill the last man; never were such fighters! I would have saved him; I would have given him a wife and let him live in Lunden; but I could not reach his side before they ran a spear under his armpit and drowned him. He was fighting waist-deep when he fell.

"Northmen are thieves, and they come a-roving summer or winter, whenever they're least expected; but the fault I find with them is wearing armor, which is not the way a man should fight. We Britons fight nearly naked, not esteeming cowardice."

"You have brought me a long way to see Gobhan!" Tros interrupted drily.

"Aye, I was coming to that. You spoke of Cæsar's fleet, you remember. Now Gobhan owes his life to me. If you can understand that noise he makes between his gums, he shall tell you things that Cæsar does not know. Gobhan knows the Book of Domnu." *

"Does he understand the tides?" asked Tros, nudging Conops.

In Samothrace, where he came from, they knew more of "Domnu" and the inner meanings of the word than any druid did.

"Tides, full moons and the weather—he knows it all," said Caswallon. "Make shift to understand his yammerings, and I will send him south for you in one of the longships. He shall lie in wait at Hythe."

"There are strange tides around this island," said Tros, observing Gobhan closely.

"Aye," said Caswallon. "Our tides puzzle the Northmen badly. And the worst of it is, that this old wizard teaches them as readily as he teaches us, when they can find him! He has no discretion. I have often wondered why I did not let my people burn him."

"Let me talk with him," said Tros, beckoning the old man.

Together they went and sat on logs up-ended near the furnace, where Tros could draw patterns with his finger in the charcoal-dust on the floor. Caswallon stood and watched them, with his legs astride and hands behind his back.

The only light in that corner came from the door and in a red glow from the charcoal furnace that the bellows-man was tending. Tros's eyes glowed like a lion's, but most of his bulk was lost in shadow, as his fingers roughly traced an outline of the shore of Kent and the coast of Gaul with the narrow sea between.

The old man wiped it out and drew a better one, and for a long while Tros studied that, until at last he laid a finger on the spot

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* The very ancient sea-god of the Britons.

where he supposed the quicksands lay.* At that Gobhan nodded and looked strangely pleased. The ague left him. He began to grow excited.

Mumble-mumble— Tros could hardly understand a word of it, until Gobhan prodded the blind old bellows-man with a long stick. Then the purring roar of the furnace ceased, and the blind man sat beside them to interpret the toothless noises into more or less intelligible speech.

The blind man seemed to know as much as Gobhan did about the tides and winds and weather; as the two of them became aware of Tros's inborn understanding of the sea, they vied in their enthusiasm to explain to him, clutching him, striking each other's wrists, interrupting each other, croaking and squeaking like a pair of rusty-throated parrots, answering his questions both at once and abusing each other when he failed to understand exactly—Caswallon smiling all the while as if he watched a dog-fight.

Sun and moon—there was interminable talk about them. Gobhan suddenly wiped out the channel map and drew a diagram of sun and moon and earth, with circles to describe their courses.

But the blind man did not need the diagram to argue from; he used his two fists for earth and moon, and Gobhan's head to represent the sun, gesticulating with his foot to show the action of the tides as their positions changed.

Once in his excitement he would have burned himself by getting too close to the furnace, but Gobhan hurled him away, and the argument resumed with both men kneeling as if they were throwing dice, and Tros's heavy face, chin on hand, two feet from theirs as he leaned forward, studying first one and then the other, then the diagrams that Gobhan traced and the blind man kept on wiping out because he could not see, and did not need them.

At last Gobhan struck the blind man into silence and sat still with his eyes shut, counting days and hours, checking them off on his fingers; and by that time it was the blind man who appeared to have the ague, for he was sweating and trembling with irrepressible excitement. Gobhan on the other hand had grown as calm as if he were saying prayers.

"Mumble-mumble."

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* The Goodwins.

"Eight days," interpreted the blind man. Gobhan nodded.

Tros rose, facing Caswallon.

"What present shall I make?" he asked.

"None," said Caswallon. "If you give them money they will have no further use for you. And as for their needs, they eat at my cost. Have you learned what you came for?"

"Aye, and more," said Tros.

"I will send them both to Hythe to await you there, in the harbor with the three ships," said Caswallon.

And then Conops entered; he had slunk out to explore the marsh, and came back with slime up to his knees, resheathing the long knife in the red sash at his waist.

"Master, I have seen the ships. They are no good," he remarked in Greek. "They are too long for their beam, too high at bow and stern to steer in a breeze; and they would swallow a quartering sea and lie down under it as a Briton swallows mead, or my name isn't Conops!"

"That is their affair," said Tros.

"They are leaky," Conops insisted. "Their seams are as open as the gratings on a prison window. I vow I could stick my fingers in! I would as soon put to sea in an orange-basket. Some of the cordage is made of wool, and some of leather! Some of it is good flax, but you never saw such patchwork!"

The blind man returned to his bellows. Gobhan peered into a clay crucible that was set in the charcoal furnace, shaking again with ague and not pleased, because the crucible had cooled. Both of them appeared to have forgotten Tros, and they took no notice whatever of Caswallon who beckoned to Tros to come out and see the three longships.

They lay berthed in the mud up a creek well concealed from the river by a bank of rushes. There were branches fastened to their masts to render them invisible against the trees. They were very small, but not ill-built, and they were much more seaworthy than Conops made them out to be.

The woolen cordage Conops had described turned out to be the lashings that held in place the tent-cloth with which they were covered, but it was true they were moored with horse-hide warps made fast to the nearest trees. Nor were they very leaky; they were well tarred, and a day's work on their seams by half a dozen men would make them fit for sea.

"Where are the crews?" asked Tros.

"Doubtless carousing!" said Caswallon. "It needs a month to sober them when they have beaten off a North Sea rover. Three weeks gone, the three of them together sunk a longship down at Thames-mouth, and I paid them well for it."

"There is need for haste," said Tros.

"There shall be haste! I will promise them another big reward. And there will be Gobhan with them, whom they fear a great deal more than they fear me—for they who follow the sea are bigger fools than they who live on land!

"I will say that if they fail to reach Hythe and if they fail to obey you, Gobhan shall turn them all into fish. They will believe that, and they are too familiar with fish to wish to grow scales and fins! The rest is for you to contrive."

"Very well," said Tros. "Understand me: I do not know what the gods will have to say about all this. The gods prevent many things that men design; but I think the gods are not in league with Cæsar. Unless Cæsar's cold heart changes, I am likely to be pilot when he sets sail for the coasts of Britain.

"I will lead him to the high cliffs that are nearest to the coast of Gaul, and if it may be, I will wreck him on the quicksands in mid-channel. I will surely do that if I understand the tides aright and if the wind should favor.

"In that case, you and I will never meet again, because, of all the certainties the surest is, that if I set Cæsar on the quicksands he will slay me. And we may miss the quicksands; or Cæsar's men may see the water boiling over them and steer clear.

"So watch for his fleet, and be ready with an army to oppose his landing. And if he succeeds in landing, count on me nevertheless, provided you are sure that Gobhan and these three ships are safe in Hythe, and that the crews will obey me when I come."

"Tros!" said Caswallon, and seized him by the right hand.

Their eyes met for the space of seven breaths.

Then the Chief spoke again:

"You are a man. But I do not know yet why you do this."

"I have not yet done it!" Tros answered.

"Nevertheless, in my heart I know you will attempt it. Why? What am I to you? And what is Britain to you?"

"What is fire to water?" Tros answered. "One stream serves as well as the next when it comes to checking forest fires. If you were invading Cæsar's rightful heritage, then I would side with him against you! I am a free man, Caswallon. A free man mocks himself, who sits in idleness while Cæsars burn up freedom!"

"I see you are not a man to whom I may offer a reward," said Caswallon, gripping his hand again. "But I am your friend, Tros; Fflur is also your friend."

"I am glad of it," Tros answered. "But be careful not to judge too hastily, for thus far we have only dealt in words. And next, I must trade words with Cæsar, who values nothing except deeds that glorify him. Remember: I will tell Cæsar that if he comes swiftly with a small force he will catch you unprepared. First then, prove me a false prophet and a liar! Then call me friend—if both of us deserve it—when we meet again!"

CHAPTER VIII

AN INTERVIEW NEAR A DRUID'S CAVE

Treason betrays itself. There was never a treachery yet that did not yield its secret. But not to the treacherous. He who is blinded by his own treacheries, how shall he read and understand the signs in others? In the presence of integrity treason must boast; it can not keep silence.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Tros drove back in the night, with a purse of gold at his waist that Caswallon gave him for expenses, in a chariot horsed with four of the finest stallions Britain could produce, driven by a long-haired charioteer whose pride was that no chariot had ever overtaken him since he had been made chief's messenger.

They were followed by a dozen riders, partly for protection from wolves that bayed in the forests all night long, but equally for the important business of compelling wayside autocrats to furnish fresh teams when required and to provide their best, instead of leading out old lame horses.

Even so, because of a bent bronze chariot-wheel, that caught between two sunken tree-trunks in a dark ford, and the time it took to find and awaken a blacksmith, and the time he took to get the wheel hot, straighten and replace it, the sun was up an hour before they came to Britomaris' house, where the charioteer shouted for a fresh team.

There was a rabble of men and women in the yard, and of all sorts, light- and dark-skinned, tall and stocky, some so dwarfish as to seem deformed. And they were not disposed to make way for the chariot, or to bring out horses at the charioteer's command.

Some one shouted for Britomaris; but it was Gwenhwyfar who came to the door and stood looking at Tros long and sullenly before she spoke.

"You? You dare to come here?" she said at last, curling her lip and glowering under lowered eyelids.

"Horses!" roared the charioteer, but she acted as if she had not heard him, and the mounted men rode off to the stables to help themselves.

"Look!" said Gwenhwyfar pointing. "These are my people. They have come to see the shame you brought on Britomaris and on me! Dog—that have slept in my house and betrayed me to Caswallon! Dog—that are servant of Cæsar and false to Cæsar, too! Insolent dog—with the eyes of a druid, the teeth of a wolf and the breath and the speech of a viper!"

There was none, now the escort were gone, except Conops, crouching in the chariot, to protect Tros from violence. Conops loosed his long knife, for the crowd looked ugly, and the charioteer felt at the reins to get the stallions on their toes—ready to wheel them and charge through the crowd at a moment's warning.

"Draw your sword, master!" Conops whispered.

But Tros touched him on the back to calm him.

"Where is Commius?" he asked.

"Aye! Where is Commius! He was my guest. Who betrayed him?"

Gwenhwyfar sneered and tossed the hair out of her eyes.

"Commius, who was your friend! Commius, who ate at the same table with you in this, my house! Commius, who slept under my roof! Where is Commius, whom you betrayed?"

"I asked, where is he!" Tros had a voice like rolling thunder when the mood was on him.

Gwenhwyfar looked startled, but her eyes glared defiance.

"Go ask the druids! Go! You shall eat no more in my house! Drive him forth, men! Drive him!"

She threw out both arms in a gesture that condemned him to mob mercy, and the crowd hardly hesitated. Some one threw a javelin, that missed and stuck quivering in the house wall; and before the twang of that ceased, Tros was almost off his feet from the sudden jerk as the charioteer wheeled his team and sent it headlong at the crowd. There were no scythes in the sockets on the axles, or he would have mowed a dozen of them.

"Kill him!" screamed Gwenhwyfar.

But the words froze on her lips; for the escort arrived on the scene from behind the house, charging with lowered spears, riding fresh, corn-fed, frantic horses they had seized. No one was slain. The crowd scattered and ran, those who had weapons throwing them away; but many were knocked down, and some were soundly thumped with spear butts.

The charioteer laughed and wheeled the team around again to face the door, while four of the escort went to bring a fresh team for the chariot. They were laughing, and not in the least annoyed by the disturbance; two of the remaining escort chaffed Gwenhwyfar mercilessly, calling her "Caswallon's scornling," but she ignored them as if they were a mile away. Her whole hatred was aimed at Tros, concentrated on him, glaring, venomous.

"Do you love your father as you love your friends?" she asked.

But Tros, listening with both ears, pretended to be careful how they changed the team.

"Drive fast!" she mocked. "Aye, drive like the wind! You shall not reach Gaul before your father dies! Cæsar will avenge me! Cæsar will draw blood in exchange for Commius! Hurry, before the crows leave nothing you can recognize!"

Tros's face showed no emotion, but his grip on Conops' shoulder told another tale. The one-eyed sailor winced and tried to loosen the grip with cautious fingers.

"Who knows where Commius is? I will speak with him," said

Tros; and one of the escort seized a man who tried to slink away around the corner of the house.

Backed against the wall and held there with a spear point at his throat, the man soon gave his information and was let go. The four fresh horses were yoked by that time.

And at last Tros spoke to Gwenhwyfar:

"Gwenhwyfar, wife of Britomaris, you will fall to Cæsar yet! Cæsar will treat you less kindly than I did. You may offer him ten kingdoms, and yourself thrown in, but I see you walking through the streets of Rome at Cæsar's chariot tail; and, if by then you are not too worn from weeping, and too sore-footed, and too thin, there will be an auction afterward.

"Rome stinks, Gwenhwyfar! You will miss the sweet earth smell of Britain, and the freedom, and the green oaks and the thick turf underfoot! Rome's streets are hard, and her heart is harder. But harder than all—aye, harder than that heart of yours—is Cæsar's! Farewell!"

He bowed to her as the chariot wheeled away, and the men of the escort paid her scurvy compliments; but she stood still, leaning back against the door-post with her head erect, glaring her anger until the chariot and its escort were lost to view.

"Lonely she looks, and I am sorry for her, for she will be lonelier still if ever she meets Cæsar," Tros said to Conops.

But she had friends; for as they galloped by the corner of the wall that shut the house from view, a stone hurled by an unseen hand missed Tros by so little that he almost felt the weight of it, and it broke the tough turf where it landed.

"But, master—your father!" Conops was clenching and unclenching his fingers. "Has she sent a messenger to Cæsar? Has she betrayed us?" Conops clutched his knife and spoke to Tros between thin, vindictive lips. "If your father is slain, my master, I will beg one favor of you: Let me live that I may bury this in her!"

He showed six inches of his knife-blade.

"I think she lied," said Tros.

But his voice betrayed him. He did not think that. He knew she spoke the truth; he knew some messenger had gone to inform Cæsar what had happened to Commius the Gaul, along with, doubtless, a long story about himself. His blood ran cold. He knew how much mercy his father would receive from Cæsar when that sort of tale should reach the Roman's ears.

"There is room for things to happen between here and Gaul," he said after a minute. "It is one thing to send a messenger; another for the man to reach his goal. Moreover, Caius Volusenus has a fairly swift ship. We may arrive there first."

There was delay, though, before they resumed the ride to where Caius Volusenus waited for them. The escort led into the forest and then wheeled out of the fairway down a lane that bore no tracks of wheels, where they had to stop a time or two to lift the chariot over fallen trees, and the bronze wheels cut deeply into moss.

At the end of a mile or two of winding between ancient oaks, where the deer fled suddenly in front of them and rabbits scampered for the undergrowth, they entered a wide clearing. There a dewy hillside faced them, scattered with enormous stones; and in the midst of the hill there was a considerable clump of very ancient yew trees, with a cave mouth just below that, its entrance arched with three adze-trimmed monoliths. Above the trees there was a cluster of neat, thatched dwellings.

Among the trees sat druids in their long robes, and one of them was the ancient who had held forth on the night when Tros first met Caswallon.

The druids, led by the old one, came solemnly down the hillside and surrounded Tros's chariot. He greeted them, and the escort jumped down from their horses to show respect, yet it was a peculiarly masked respect; they looked as little interested as they could, perhaps because Tros was a stranger.

"Is Commius here? May I have word with him?" asked Tros when the greeting was all done.

The old man sent two younger druids to the cave. They brought out Commius, with fetters on his wrists but not ill-treated otherwise. The Gaul's black-bearded face was set so as to mask emotion, and a lean smile hid whatever he might think of Tros. He nodded a curt greeting, holding the clasped hands in front of him to ease the bronze fetters' weight.

"Commius, I am on my way to Cæsar," said Tros.

The Gaul inclined his head slightly to signify that he understood, but he said nothing; nor did he glance at the druids, or make any sign except that unnoticeable nod.

It was only by imagining himself in the Gaul's position that Tros realized there would be no conversation while the druids listened. But the druids also realized it. Almost before Tros could face about to beg their indulgence the oldest of them made a signal and they walked away in silence and sat down at a sufficient distance to be out of earshot.

"Now!" said Tros. "What shall I say of you to Cæsar?"

Commius smiled thinly.

"You will say of me to Cæsar what you wish to say, if he permits," he answered. "*My* message has already gone."

"Have you a message for your Gauls?" asked Tros.

"Yes. Bid the Atrebates obey Cæsar. Cæsar will avenge me."

The voice was cleverly controlled, but the expression of his face masked contempt too studiously for Tros not to see through it.

"You think you have contrived my downfall, Commius," he answered. "I doubt it. A man is hard to kill until his time comes. For my own part I am not a dealer in men's lives. I have sought you out to see what I can do to help you."

"Can you set me free?" asked Commius, and the sneer in his voice was biting; it brought the fire into Tros's amber eyes.

"You could set yourself free very easily if you were not a traitor to your race," he answered. "Commius, we are two fools, I because I did not know how wholly you are Cæsar's slave—"

The word stung; Commius' black eyes blazed at last. He almost answered, but controlled himself.

"—and you, because you think to promote your own ambition before you do your duty to the Gauls. You have eaten from Cæsar's hand. You like the food! But he will treat you as he does the other dogs in due time."

"Dogs?" snarled Commius, losing his control at last. "The dogs shall tear your carcass before you are twelve hours older!"

"So that is it! I thank you for the warning, Commius!"

Tros laughed and turned away, having learned what he came to learn. The druids, observing that the conference was over, came forward in a group, and the two who had brought Commius from the cave took charge of him again. Tros spoke to the oldest druid, greeting him respectfully:

"Lord Druid, before Commius became your prisoner, he sent a messenger toward the coast. Where would such a messenger be likely to lie in wait to slay me before taking ship?"

The old druid glanced at the escort, who were munching bread in a group beside their horses, having washed their hands and faces in the dew.

"My son, those horsemen will take care of you," he answered.

"But a messenger did go?"

"Aye, a man went, with a letter to Etair, son of Etard. Gwenhwyfar, wife of Britomaris, wrote it. Etair is her half-brother, and his place lies near the seashore where you landed from the Roman ship. It was his men who attacked you when you landed."

Tros scratched his chin, grinning thoughtfully, and Conops went and stood where he could watch his master's face. Conops' only remedy for anything was that long knife he carried in his sash, but he knew that Tros despised fighting if a craftier way might be found out of a difficulty. Craftiness is much more nervous work than fighting, and Conops held his breath.

"If a druid might ride with me," said Tros at last, still scratching at his chin, "a druid who would lead me to a small seaworthy boat, whose owner would obey my orders—"

The old druid nodded and, turning his back on Tros, gave orders very swiftly in rumbling undertones. It was not clear why he did not wish Tros to hear what he said, unless it was the habit of keeping his own counsel and establishing a mystery whenever possible.

He had hardly finished speaking when the young druid, who had befriended Tros when he first landed, went and sat down in the chariot, tucking his long robe in under his feet.

Then the old High Druid dismissed Tros with one sentence:

"Caius Volusenus grows impatient because his ship lies close to a dangerous shore."

But he did not explain how he knew that. He held up his right hand in an act of invocation and boomed out words that sounded like a ritual, then gestured to Tros to be gone.

The escort mounted at once with an air of relief and began laughing and chattering; the charioteer preferred not to wait another second, but drove toward Tros, and the moment he and Conops had stepped in they were off at full gallop, returning down the same glade by which they had come.

"These druids," said Conops in Greek, thumbing his long knife for the scandalized druid's benefit, "are too much like specters from another world for me. They are not enough like honest men or criminals for me to trust them."

Tros smiled.

"Never mind," he answered. "I would trust you less if you should trust any man too much! Put your knife away!"

CHAPTER IX

TROS DISPLAYS HIS SEAMANSHIP AND A WAY OF HIS OWN OF MINDING HIS OWN BUSINESS

If it were true, as ye say, that to slay is to prevail, then why not kill me?

Ye could wear my robes and occupy my seat. But could ye know what I know? Could ye think what I think? Could ye do what I do? Could ye have my vision, and enjoy that, merely by proving that violence slays and that flesh becomes dust?

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE forest went down to the sea along the route that Tros took that morning; and because the druid ordered it they made a detour to the westward that brought them, near midday, to a swampy harbor hidden amid trees, not far from where the chalky downs begin that draw nearer to the shore southeastward until they form the white cliffs of Kent.

"Hythe," said the druid, pointing to where roofs over a mud-and-wattle wall could be seen between wind-twisted branches.

The town was hidden from the sea; there were no signs of cultivation or of human dwellings that would be likely to tempt sea rovers into the reed-infested harbor mouth. There was not even an inhabitant in sight, although there were boats drawn up into the reeds, amid which narrow, winding paths led mazily toward the town wall. Gulls and other sea-fowl by the thousand filled the air with harsh music, under a bright sky flaked with fleecy clouds.

"Hythe, a high tide, and the wind in the southwest!" said Tros, meditating. "How often does the wind set thus?"

"More often than not," said the druid. "It is the winds from the west that save this land from pirates. Northwest, west, southwest—most days in the year. The Northmen set forth, but three times out of five storms blow them back again." *

"And a fair slant for Gaul, but a rising sea," said Tros. "Caius Volusenus will be fretting at his anchor, if he has not gone away and left me."

They went and stood on the shingle beach, where the rounded stones sang sharply of the weight behind the waves and they could see, amid the white-caps in the distance to the eastward, a galley that pitched at her anchor and rolled until her heavy fighting top looked like a plaything of the spray.

"The Romans are the worst seamen I have yet seen," Tros remarked, screwing up his eyes to stare along the waves. "They think weight is strength, and pit their strength against the sea. They hang on by brute force, when a seaman would employ a little strategy to use the sea against itself.

"If Caius Volusenus were a seaman, he would not be lying off a lee shore until his crew was weak from vomiting. If he were any kind of man except a Roman soldier, he would have explored this shore-line, instead of waiting for me to bring information.

"But that is the Roman method: Seize a hostage, threaten him, then send his son or his brother to save the hostage's life by betraying some one else! And because the world is what it is, and men are what they are, the plan succeeds too often!

"But I have seen the Romans lose a fleet of ninety ships on the coast of Sicily, because a land general ordered thus and so, and they knew no better than to obey the fool! What is that group of men along the beach a mile away?"

The druid, peering under the palm of his hand, looked anxious but said nothing. It was clear enough that the men were forcing a small boat into the sea, and at the first attempt it overturned in the surf. They had to haul it back on the beach and bail the water out.

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* Great Britain has always had the "weather-gage" of an invader.

"Now that is a strange state of affairs," said Tros. "They look to me like Britons."

"They *are* Britons," said the druid.

"Don't they know this harbor? Can't they take a boat from here?"

The druid nodded, putting two and two together, frowning:

"You are too late, Tros! That will be the messenger whom Commius sent to Cæsar. They who are helping him to launch the boat belong to Etair, son of Etard, who is against Caswallon, whereas the men of Hythe are for him. They plan to reach Caius Volusenus' ship ahead of you. They will succeed, because it will take us too long to procure a crew. The men of Hythe are doubtless on the hills behind us, tending cattle and watching Caius Volu—"

The druid coughed, for Tros clapped him on the back so suddenly that he bit a word off midway.

"Quick!" said Tros. "Show me a boat with a sail!"

"But a crew?" said the druid.

"I have one!"

"Those horsemen? They can hunt deer; they can drink and sing and fight, but—"

"I said, I have *one!* He is enough! Make haste, man!"

That druid never hurried faster in his life. They found a boat within a quarter of an hour, whose sail had not been carried ashore and hidden. They found oars and a pole in another boat, and from a third boat lifted a dozen yards of good hemp rope with which to repair the running gear.

Tros said good-by to the escort, gave them all the gold out of Caswallon's purse, and nearly broke the hand of one in his hurry to get the good-bys over and be gone. Then he kissed the druid on both cheeks, cried out to Conops to raise the sail and shoved the boat out from the reeds, jumping in as the keel slid free of the mud.

It was a strong boat, but awkward and as slow as a drifting log, although they labored at the oars like Titans.

But at last they worked their way over the bar at the harbor mouth and caught the southwest wind that laid her over until the gunwale was awash. Then Tros took the steering oar and made experiments to discover the best point of sailing, but he found her a clumsy tub at best.

Her blunt bow checked her constantly, and he had hard work to keep from being swamped by the rising sea. Conops was bailing half the time.

They had made a drenching, wallowing mile of it, and Caius Volusenus' ship seemed farther off than ever, her hull down out of sight between the waves or rising over a big one with her nose toward the sky, when Conops shouted, pointing shoreward:

"They have launched that other! They are giving chase!"

It was a faster boat and a bigger one, manned by half a dozen men, who had forced her through the surf at last and were following in Tros's wake. Her big square lug-sail bellied in the wind and lifted her along a good three yards for his two.

Rolling dangerously as the helm changed, she began to work to windward, not more than a quarter of a mile astern, two men with bows and arrows standing in her bow and a very big man in a bearskin coat leaning his weight against the steering oar.

"He is reckless—they have promised him a fat reward for our two heads!" said Tros.

"Master, make for the shore!" urged Conops. "They are too fast and too many for us!"

But Tros headed farther out to sea, edging his boat craftily to keep the quartering waves from swamping her. He lost a little speed by doing that, and Caius Volusenus' ship was still a good six miles away.

"The tortoise who runs, and the hare who fights, are equal fools!" he growled in Conops' ear.

But Conops drew his long knife nervously, returned it to its sheath and then drew out Tros's sword, examined its keen edge and drove it home again into the scabbard.

"We two against seven—and no arrows!" he said in a discouraged voice.

But Tros, making no remark, continued his experiments, discovering a trick the awkward hull possessed of falling away from the wind stern-first whenever he relieved the pressure from the oar. Nothing saved her then from swamping but the pressure of the wind that heeled her over and exposed more broadside to the waves —that, and instant skill at the helm.

As Tros eased her off from one of those experiments, an arrow hummed into the sail and stuck there. "Take cover below the weather gunwale," he ordered; so Conops knelt, begging leave to take the oar and run the risk himself.

"For if you die, master, and I live, can I save your father?"

Tros paid no attention to him. He was watching the approaching boat and her crew out of the corner of his eye and considering the flight of three more arrows that winged their way into the sail. The pursuing boat was to windward now, nearly abeam, changing her course so as gradually to reduce the distance between them.

"They shoot across the wind, yet all the arrows find their way into the sail," he said at last. "That is not bad shooting. That is done on purpose. They propose to make us prisoners. Let them see you throw up your hands!"

"Master! We have had enough of being prisoners!"

"Obey!" commanded Tros.

So Conops stood, throwing his hands up, while Tros edged his boat cautiously toward the other, which turned at once and came downwind toward him.

"They are seven," he growled between his teeth, for he did not want it seen that he was talking. "Return your knife to its sheath, Conops! Four of them will jump aboard us. See! They stand ready in the bow. That leaves three for us to tackle. When I give the word, jump! I like their boat better than this one. Leave the big man in the bearskin coat, and that other, to me. Take you the fellow with the bow and arrows who kneels by the mast. Are you ready?"

As he spoke, a big sea lifted both boats, and in the trough that followed the man in the bearskin shouted, shoving his helm hard over. They rose together, side by side and almost bumping on the crest of the next wave. Tros suddenly let go the sheet, exactly at the moment when the four men in the other boat's bow jumped.

They had calculated on his veering away from them, if anything; but it was his stern that fell to leeward; his bow came up into the wind. They missed, the pitch and roll assisting Tros as he plied the helm.

Three sprawled into the water and the fourth just grasped the gunwale, where he clung until the two boats crashed together and the force of the collision shook him off.

The man in the bearskin roared an order, leaning his whole strength against the steering oar, but he was too late; the collision spilled the wind out of his sail and he shipped the top of a wave over his stern that almost swamped him.

Tros, calculating to a hair's breadth, had timed the turn so that his bow struck the stranger amidships and, continuing the swing, he let the other boat bear down on him until for a second they lay parallel and bumping, facing opposite directions.

"Jump!" he shouted then. He and Conops sprang for the bigger boat, where the three men stood to receive them with drawn knives.

But each of them had to cling to something with one hand to preserve his balance because the boat was beam-on to the sea and wallowing, as the loose sail flapped and thundered.

Tros took his oar with him, and landed with the blade of it against a man's throat. That man went backward overboard, and Conops' knife went home to the hilt into the third man, striking upward from below the ribs.

The man in the bearskin thrust at Tros, but stumbled over the dead man, who flopped and slid to and fro, bleeding in knee-deep water. So the blow missed, but the butt of Tros's oar did not; it struck the out-thrust hand and spun the knife overside.

The fellow in the bearskin, shaking his hand because the blow had stung him, jumped in on Tros with a yell; but the boat lurched; Tros had the better sea legs. Roaring to Conops to keep his knife away, he seized his opponent by the neck and slowly forced him backward overboard.

"Haul on the sheet!" he shouted then, jumping for the steering oar that swung and banged in its iron bracket. In a moment they were paying off before the wind, and the boat they had left was down between the waves a hundred yards behind, half-full of water and sinking.

"Take that bucket and bail for your life!" Tros shouted, conning the rising sea as he headed up a bit toward the wind; for the tide set inshore; they had made a lot of leeway while the short fight lasted.

For a long time after that he made no remark, until Conops had bailed most of the water overside.

Then Conops, with his back toward Tros, searched his victim carefully and, finding nothing worth appropriating, picked him up and threw him into the sea to leeward. When he had seen the body sink he came and sat down by his master.

"Clean up the blood!" Tros commanded.

Conops went to work again, using a piece of sail-cloth that he found in a box under a coil of rope. Presently he returned, and resumed the seat.

"So now you have a dead man to account for," was all Tros said, sparing him one swift glance as they rose over a big wave.

Conops looked surprised, indignant, irritated. He had expected praise.

"It was him or me," he answered after a moment's pause.

"Well—you killed him. Can you give him back his life?"

"But, master, *you* killed two men!"

"Not I! I gave them leave to swim!" said Tros.

"They could not swim. They are all drowned, master."

"That is their affair. I never forbade them to learn to swim."

"But that fellow clad in a bearskin—how could he have swum? His coat drowned him."

"He never asked my leave to wear that coat," said Tros. "I could have slain him with my sword as easily as you slew your man. But I spared him. I gave him leave to swim. No enemy of mine can hold me answerable for the bearskin coat he wears!"

"I am glad I slew," said Conops, glaring fiercely through his one eye.

"Laugh, if you wish," said Tros. "But a man should mind his own business. At some time or another, you will have that fellow's life to answer for, which should have been his business and not yours."

Conops was silent for a long time.

"Well. At least you have a stolen boat," he said at last.

"So?" said Tros. "When, then? One I borrowed, by a druid's leave. This one I exchanged for that one; and who started the exchange? I tell you, Conops, you have nearly as much as Cæsar has to learn about the art of living! It is a coward's act to kill, if there is any other way."

"Then you call me a coward, master?"

"Yes," said Tros, "but not as bad a one as Cæsar; which, if you were, I would contrive to get along without you, instead of trying to teach you wisdom. Ease off the sheet a little—so—plenty. Now get forward and see whether Caius Volusenus signals us."

CHAPTER X

CAIUS JULIUS CÆSAR

Ye invite me to blame the conqueror. But I find fault with the conquered. If ye were men, who would truly rather die that eat the bread of slavery or bow the knee to arrogance, none could conquer you. Nay, none I tell you. If ye were steadfastly unwilling to enslave others, none could enslave you. Be ye your own masters. If ye are the slaves of envy, malice, greed and vanity, the vainest, greediest, most malicious and most envious man is far greater than you. His ambition will impel him to prove it. Your meanness will enable him to prove it.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Tros went about between two waves as he came nearly abreast of the plunging galley and, falling away before the wind as close to her side as he dared, shouted for a rope. But none was thrown to him. He had to work like fury at the steering oar, bump the galley's side and jump for it, thanking the clumsy shipwrights who had left good toe- and finger-hold.

For that galley had been thrown together by unwilling Gauls at Cæsar's order, very roughly in the Roman fashion under the eyes of Roman overseers, and had been rendered fit for sea by laying strips of wood to hold the caulking in the seams.

Tros and Conops clambered aboard and let the small boat drift away. There were seasick Romans lying everywhere—they all but stepped on two of them—but not a sign of Caius Volusenus.

Lemon-countenanced and weak from vomiting, a legionary summoned him at last. He came out of his cabin below the after fighting deck and dropped himself weakly against the bulkhead—a middle-aged man, dignified and handsome even in that predicament, with his toga nearly blown off in the wind and his bare knees trembling. His eyes were a bit too close together to create instant confidence.

"How dare you keep me waiting all this while?" he grumbled, trying to make a weary voice vibrate with anger. "We might have lost the ship, plunging in this welter at a cable's end!"

"You will lose her yet!" said Tros; but his eye was up-wind, and he knew the wind was falling. "Have you a spar to make fast to the cable? You had better let the anchor go and make sail as she turns before the wind."

Caius Volusenus doubted that advice, but Tros was in haste now to return to Cæsar, so he talked glibly of a lee shore and a gale, and pointed to the rocks where the tide would carry them.

One thing was certain—that the crew was much too weak and discouraged to haul the anchor up; so while Caius Volusenus and two young decurions aroused and bullied the crew into a semblance of activity, Tros and Conops lashed a spar to the cable-end and tossed it overboard.

Then, when Caius Volusenus gave the signal, they slipped the cable and the galley swung away before the wind with three reefs in her great square-sail.

Tros took the helm and no man questioned him. It was not until they reached mid-channel and the wind fell almost to a calm that Caius Volusenus climbed up to the after-deck and leaned there, yellow and weak-kneed, resuming the command.

"Not for Cæsar—not even for Cæsar," he grumbled, "will I take charge of a ship again on this thrice cursed sea! He would not trust a crew of Gauls. He said they would overpower us Romans if a gale should make us seasick. Well, I would rather fight Gauls than vomit like a fool in Neptune's bosom. What news have you?"

"News for Cæsar," Tros answered.

"Speak!" commanded Caius Volusenus.

"No," said Tros. "You are a faithful soldier, I don't doubt; but you are not Cæsar."

Caius Volusenus scowled, but Tros knew better than to let his information reach Cæsar at second-hand, for then Caius Volusenus would receive the credit for it. He, Tros, needed all the credit he could get with Cæsar, and on more counts than one.

"Well, there are two of you," said Caius Volusenus. "I will have them flog that man of yours, and see what he can tell me."

He stepped toward the break of the deck to give the order to a legionary who was standing watch beside the weather sheet.

"Better order them to row," said Tros. "There is not enough wind now to fill the sail. Flog Conops, and you injure me. Injure me, and

I will fashion a tale for Cæsar that shall make you sorry for it. Hasten to Cæsar, and I will say what may be said in your behalf."

Caius Volusenus turned and faced him, his skin no longer quite so yellow since the wind had ceased.

There was an avaricious, hard look in his eyes, not quite accounted for by the ship's rolling over the ground-swell.

"Did you find pearls?" he demanded.

"Plenty," said Tros after a moment's thought.

"Have you any?"

"No. But I know how to come by them."

He thought another moment and then added:

"If I should return as Cæsar's pilot, and you, let us say, were to lend me a small boat in which to slip away by night, I could lay my hands on a good sized potful of pearls, and I would give you half of them."

Caius Volusenus ordered out the oars and watched until the rowing was in full swing, beating time for the discouraged men until the oars all moved in unison. Then he turned on Tros suddenly:

"Why should I trust you?" he demanded.

"Why not? By the gods, why not?" Tros answered. "Have I played you false? I might have stayed in Britain. I might have wrecked this ship. For the rest, you shall hear me speak in praise of you to Cæsar's face. What do you find untrustworthy about me?"

"You are a Greek!" said Caius Volusenus.

"Nay, not I! I am a Samothracian," said Tros.

Caius Volusenus did not care to know the difference. He snorted. Then he ordered the idle sail brailed up to the spar; and for a while after that he beat time for the rowers, who were making hardly any headway against the tide that was setting strongly now the other way.

At last he turned again to Tros, standing squarely with his hands behind him, for the ship was reasonably steady; and except for those too narrowly spaced eyes he looked like a gallant Roman in his fine bronze armor; but he spoke like a tradesman:

"If you will swear to me on your father's honor, and if you will agree to leave your father in Gaul as a hostage for fulfilment of your oath, I will see what can be done about a small boat—in the matter of the pearls. You would have to give me two thirds of the pearls."

"Two thirds if you like," said Tros, "but not my father! He knows these waters better than I do. He is a better pilot and a wiser seaman. Unless Cæsar sets him free on my return, Cæsar may rot for a pilot—and all his ships and crews—and you along with him!"

Caius Volusenus faced about again and cursed the rowers volubly. Then, after a while, he ordered wine brought out for them and served in brass cups. That seemed to revive their spirits and the rowing resumed steadily.

After a long time Caius Volusenus, with his hands behind him, came within a pace of Tros and thrust his eagle nose within a hand's length of his face.

"Where are these pearls?" he demanded.

"In a woman's keeping."

"Why did you bring none with you?"

"Because, although the woman loved me nicely, there was scant time, and she has a husband, who is something of a chief. She begged me to take her with me. But I did not see why Cæsar should have those pearls, and I had thought of you and what a confederate you might be."

Conops, squatting on the steps that led to the after-deck, was listening, admiring, wondering. Greek to the backbone, he loved an artful lie. His face rose slowly above the level of the deck; his one eye winked, and then he ducked again.

"Well, let us leave your father out of it," said Caius Volusenus. "He is Cæsar's prisoner; let Cæsar free, keep, or kill him. That is nothing to me. I have a wife in Rome. Strike the bargain, Tros—"

Tros nodded.

"—and remember this: I hold no Greek's oath worth a drachma, but I hold my own inviolable. If you fail me, I swear by the immortal gods that I will never rest until you, and your father both, have been flogged to death. Bear that well in mind. I have the confidence of Cæsar."

"You are a hard man," Tros answered, looking mildly at him; he could make those amber eyes of his look melting when he chose.

"I am a very hard man. I am a Roman of the old school."

Caius Volusenus called for wine, and his own slave brought it to him in a silver goblet. He drank two gobletsful and then, as an afterthought, offered some to Tros. It was thin, sour stuff.

There was no more conversation. Caius Volusenus went below into his cabin, to sleep and regain strength after the long seasickness. The rowers just kept steering way, and Tros plied the helm until the tide turned; but even with the changing tide no wind came and they made but slow progress until moonlight showed the coast of Gaul and Caritia * sands still ten or twelve miles in the offing.

Then Caius Volusenus came on deck again and fumed because the anchor had been left behind. He feared those sand-banks, having seen too many galleys go to pieces on them and he did not want to do the same thing under Cæsar's eyes.

Beyond the banks the masts of half a hundred ships stood out like etchings in the haze, and the glow of Cæsar's camp-fires was like rubies in the night. The sea was dead, flat calm, but Caius Volusenus would not risk the narrow channel in darkness, and the rowers had to dawdle at the oars all night long, while Conops took the helm and Tros slept.

As day was breaking, with the tide behind him and a puff of wind enough to fill the sail, Tros took the helm again and worked his way into a berth between galleys that lay with their noses lined along the shore.

There all was bustle and a sort of orderly confusion, with the ringing of the shipwrights' anvils and the roar of bellows, the squeaking of loaded ox-wains and the tramping of the squads of slaves who carried down munitions and the provender to put aboard the ships.

At the rear was a fortified, rectangular camp, enclosed within a deep ditch and an earth wall, along which sentries paced at intervals.

Within the camp the soldiers' tents were pitched in perfectly even rows, with streets between, and in the center, on one side of an open space, where four streets met, was Cæsar's, no better and no larger than the rest, but with the eagles planted in the earth in front of it and sentries standing by.

The huts, where prisoners and supplies were guarded, were at

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* The modern Calais.

the rear end of the camp, enclosed within a secondary ditch-and-wall. The horse lines, where the stamping stallions squealed for breakfast, were along one side, but Cæsar's special war-horse had a tent all to himself behind his master's.

In a line with Cæsar's sleeping tent there was a bigger, square one, with a table set in it and an awning spread in front; it was there, in a chair of oak and ivory, beside the table at which his secretary sat, that Cæsar attended to business.

He was up betimes and being shaved by a Spanish barber, when Caius Volusenus marched up and answered the challenge of the sentries, swaggering with the stately Roman military stride and followed by Tros and Conops, who made no effort to disguise their deep-sea roll, although it made the sentries laugh.

There were a dozen officers in waiting underneath the awning, but they made way for Caius Volusenus; he passed through, nodding to them, leaving Tros and Conops to wait until they were summoned.

But they were not without entertainment, although no man spoke to them; for in the middle of the open space exactly in front of the eagles,* a naked Gaul, held down by four legionaries, was being flogged by two others for stealing, each stroke of the cords laying open the flesh.

And there was a row of prisoners to be considered, women among them, lined up under guard awaiting Cæsar's will concerning them.

It was a long time before Cæsar sent for Tros. The Gaul was very nearly flogged to death, and the earth was purple with his blood when Caius Volusenus thrust his way between the other officers and beckoned.

Having satisfied his dignity to that extent, he came forward a stride or two to be out of earshot of the others, and whispered as Tros fell into stride beside him.

"Cæsar is in a good mood. I have spoken for you. Make your news brief and satisfactory, and all will be well. Remember: Cæsar has decided to invade Britain. Speak accordingly, and offer no discouragement. I have told him you are a splendid pilot. Let him know that you and I explored the coast together."

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* Standards bearing the insignia of the different legions and the letters S.P.Q.R.

Tros, smothering a smile, followed him between the officers and stood before the table where the Lombard secretary eyed him insolently.

Cæsar sat with a rug over his knees and his scarlet cloak hung on the back of the chair behind him. He was hardly forty-five, but he looked very bald and very old, because the barber was not yet through with him and had not yet bound on the wreath he usually wore. His cheeks looked hollow, as if the molars were all missing, and the wrinkles at the corners of his mouth twitched slightly, as if he were not perfectly at ease.

Nevertheless, he was alert and handsome from self-consciousness of power and intelligence. He sat bolt upright like a soldier; his pale smile was suave, and his eyes were as bold and calculating as a Forum money-lender's. Handsome, very handsome in a cold and studied way—he seemed to know exactly how he looked—dishonest, intellectual, extravagant, a liar, capable of any cruelty and almost any generosity at other men's expense; above all, mischievous and vicious, pouched below the eyes and lecherously lipped, but handsome—not a doubt of it.

"So Tros, you return to us?"

His voice was cultured, calm, containing just the least suggestion of a challenge. He crossed one knee over the other underneath the rug and laid his head back for the barber to adjust the golden laurel wreath. It made him look ten years younger.

"I claim my father," Tros answered.

Cæsar frowned. Caius Volusenus coughed behind his hand.

"Tell me your news," said Cæsar in a dry voice; the note of challenge was much more perceptible, and his eyes all but closed, as if he could see straight through Tros to the British coast beyond him.

"I landed. I was wounded. I was rescued by a druid. I met Caswallon and his wife Fflur. I was shown an army of a hundred men, and I saw it dismissed for the harvesting. I heard dissensions. There was some talk of an invasion, but none ready to repel it. I saw Commius, and he is held a prisoner in chains. I stole a boat and came back."

"Examining the coast with me," put in Caius Volusenus.

"Saving the interruption, that is a very proper way to turn in a report," said Cæsar.

"You may withdraw." He glanced at Caius Volusenus sharply, once, and took no further notice of him as he backed away under the awning.

"Harbors?" asked Cæsar.

"None," said Tros. "There is a good beach for the ships, good camping ground, and standing corn not far away."

"And the equinox?" asked Cæsar, glancing at the blue sky.

"I spoke about that with the druids. Yesterday's gale will be the last until the equinox arrives; that period is accurately known but none knows how soon thereafter the storms will begin, since they vary from year to year. But for the next few days there is sure to be calm weather."

"Why do they hold Commius prisoner?"

"Because he urged them to permit your army to land on the shore of Britain."

"Do they not know my reputation? Do they not know that I punish insults? Do they not know Commius is my ambassador?"

"They say he brought trashy presents that the women laughed at. They say he is a spy, not an ambassador," Tros answered.

Cæsar's face colored slightly.

"Barbarians!" he sneered, and then smiled condescendingly. "What kind of man is Caswallon?"

"He fights nearly naked," said Tros. "He thinks armor is a coward's clothing."

Cæsar looked amused.

"Has he ships?" he asked.

"I heard him boast of three."

Cæsar drummed his lean, strong fingers on the chair-arm.

"Well—I will wait until after the equinox," he said after a moment. "I have some small experience of druids. They are sly and untrustworthy. I am afraid these storms might catch me in mid-channel and scatter the fleet. I have only one strong ship; the rest were built in haste by inexperienced Gauls, good enough for calm weather, dangerous in heavy storms. And now of course, you wish to see your father?"

Tros nodded and smiled. For a moment he was off guard—almost ready to believe that sometimes Cæsar's word was worth face value.

"A splendid, dignified and noble looking man, your father. All the fault I find with him is his affection for the druids; a strange affection, not becoming to him. A great sailor, I am told. You say he knows these waters around Britain as well as you do?"

Tros nodded again, but the smile was gone. He forefelt trickery now.

"I will speak with him first," said Cæsar. "You shall see him afterward."

"Is he well?" asked Tros nervously. "Has he been treated properly, or—"

"I always treat people properly," said Cæsar in a suave voice. "There is nothing done in this camp except by my orders. You may retire."

He said the last words in a louder voice, and an officer marched in, who took Tros by the arm and led him out under the awning. Another officer was summoned.

Tros heard Cæsar's voice speaking in undertones, and less than a minute later he was marching between two officers toward the far end of the camp, where the prisoners were confined within the inner ditch and wall. There, in the gap that served as gate, he recognized the centurion who had promised to treat his father kindly, but he had no opportunity to speak with him.

He first knew that Conops was dogging his steps when the centurion on guard demanded weapons, and Conops swore in Greek because they took away his knife with scant ceremony.

"Unbuckle my sword. Hand it to them," he ordered, and Conops obeyed.

A moment later they were both shut into a low shed that had no window; a door was locked on them, and for fifteen minutes they listened to the steady tramp of a sentry, and the clank of his weapons as he turned at each end of a twenty-yard beat, before either of them spoke.

Then Conops broke the silence:

"Master," he whispered, "I can work my way out of this place. Look, where the wall is broken at the top. Lift me, and I can crawl out between wall and thatch. Let me find your father."

Tros hesitated for a moment, looking troubled.

"If they catch you, they will flog or kill you, Conops."

"I am a free man," Conops answered. "I may do what I will with my own life."

"Look like a slave, and speak like one. They will take less notice of you. Strip yourself," said Tros.

So Conops pulled off everything except a sort of kilt that he had on under the smock. Tros lifted him, and he crawled into the narrow gap where the top of the mud wall had crumbled because rain leaked through the thatch.

He had to force his way through carefully to make no noise, and he was delayed by having to wait until a sentry on the outer rampart passed on his regular beat. Then he dropped to the ground outside, and Tros heard him whisper:

"I may be a long time. Don't despair of me."

Tros picked up Conops' clothes and stowed them under his own, then paced the hut restlessly, for there was nothing to sit down on but the damp earth floor, and nothing to do but worry. At the end of an hour the door opened, and a slave in charge of a centurion brought in a bowl of boiled wheat.

"Weren't there two in here?" asked the centurion.

"I don't know," said Tros. "The hut was empty when they put me in."

The centurion shrugged his shoulders, slammed the door again and passed on. Tros heard him ask another officer whether any record had been kept of the beheadings since a week ago, but he could not catch the reply.

There began to be a lot of trumpeting, the clang of arms and the tramp of horses. A voice that spoke in stirring cadences appeared to be addressing Roman troops, but the voice was not Cæsar's. Trumpets again, and then the sound of cavalry moving off in regular formation. Half an hour after that a Latin slave-dealer, with his secretary slave and tablets, looked in while a legionary held the door open.

"I tell you, this one is not for sale," said the legionary. "Cæsar has another use for him. There was another, a one-eyed man, but I suppose he has been executed."

"Extravagance!" said the slave-dealer. "You soldiers kill off all the best ones. What with the beheadings and the draft for gladiators, males are worth a premium and females are a glut. I could bid a price for this one. He looks good."

"Save yourself trouble," said the legionary. "I tell you, Cæsar needs him."

And he slammed the door.

An hour after that came Conops, scrambling through the hole under the eaves and knocking down dry mud in handfuls. They picked it all up carefully and tossed it through the opening. Then Conops resumed his clothes.

"Master, your father was in a round hut at the other end of this prison yard."

"Was?" asked Tros.

"Was. He has gone. There is a window to that hut, with wooden bars set in the opening; and the window is toward the rampart, so I stood in shadow and had word with him. He has not been harmed, but he suffers from confinement. He was very grateful for the news of you.

"While I hid below the window, between the back of the hut and the rampart, an officer came who led him away to Cæsar. Then a sentry on the rampart spied me; so I pretended to be one of the slaves who clean the camp of rubbish.

"I picked up trash and climbed the rampart to throw the stuff into the ditch, as the others do; and so I saw them take your father into Cæsar's tent. Then I kept gathering more rubbish, and kept on climbing the rampart to throw the stuff away; so I saw them bring your father out and set him on horseback.

"The cavalry was lined up then—five hundred of them—and when they went away your father rode with them between two soldiers."

"Was he wearing his sword?" asked Tros.

"Yes."

"Which way went the cavalry?"

"Alongshore to the eastward."

"Did my father send me any message?"

"Yes, master. He said this: That after you started for Britain, Cæsar sent for him and told him he must pilot one portion of the fleet to Britain when the time comes, if he hopes ever again to see you alive.

"And your father added this: That that fleet will not reach Britain if he can prevent it.

" 'Tell him,' he said, 'it is better to die obstructing Cæsar than to live assisting him to work more havoc.'

"Then he told me to bid you not to be deceived by anything Cæsar may say, but pretend to serve Cæsar for your own life's sake, obstructing him in all ways possible, for the sake of Those who sent you forth from Samothrace."

"That will I!" said Tros, scowling.

"Then I hid awhile and watched them change the guard at this end of the prison yard. None saw me, although the sentry on the rampart passed me twice as I was making shift to climb in, setting a forked stick against the wall to set my foot on, and kicking it away afterward."

Tros paced the floor like a caged animal, his hands behind him and his chin down on his breast.

"What if Cæsar should leave me here!" he exploded at last. "He can find other pilots than me."

But Caius Volusenus was too eager for imaginary pearls to let that happen. He came striding to the hut and gained admittance after the officer on duty had sent him back, fuming and indignant, to obtain a pass from some superior.

"Now Cæsar would have left you here in chains and have used your father only, for he trusts neither of you," he began, when he was sure the door was shut and none was listening. "But I spoke up for you, and I told Cæsar you are a man whose instincts compel you to navigate safely.

"I suggested he should send your father as a pilot for the cavalry, who are embarking a few miles down the coast. He agreed because that will keep the two of you apart. It is no use arguing with Cæsar."

"No use whatever," said Tros. "What then?"

"Pluto paralyze him! He began to wonder why I set such store by you! Cæsar would suspect his mother if she brought him milk!

"He decided you are not to go with me on my ship, but with him on his, where he can keep an eye on you. And he has told me off to bring up the rear of the expedition."

Tros had not ceased to pace the floor all the while the Roman was speaking. Suddenly now he turned and faced him where a stream of sunlight shone through a crack beside the door-post.

"How much of this is true?" he demanded. "Cæsar told me he will not start until after the equinox."

"All of it is true," said the Roman, showing his decayed front teeth in something between a smile and a snarl. "Shall Cæsar tell his real plans to every prisoner he questions? Listen to me now, Tros: You would never dare to play a trick on Cæsar; but perhaps you think because I am only Caius Volusenus I am easier to trifle with.

"I remind you of my oath! At the first chance I will take care to provide you with a small boat. That is my part of it. Thereafter you bring pearls, and the woman with them, if you see fit. You may keep the woman; but two thirds of the pearls are mine, according to agreement. And if the pearls are not enough, or if you fail me"—he showed his teeth again—"remember my oath, that is all!"

"Do your part," said Tros. "I will do mine."

Caius Volusenus nodded drily and shouted to the sentry to unlock the door and let him out. When he was gone, Tros took Conops by the shoulders.

"Little man, little man!" he exclaimed, "that Roman's avarice will thwart a worse rascal than himself! Cæsar, for this once at least, shall fail!"

CHAPTER XI

THE EXPEDITION SAILS

Ye have heard, ye have seen the sea and all its waves come thundering against the cliffs. Lo, it fails; it is hurled back upon itself. But does the sea cease? Neither shall envy and all its armies cease. It shall thunder and roar and suck and undermine, until ye learn, at some time in this Eternity, that Motion is Law. But ye think of the motion of chariots, whereas I speak of the growth of Wisdom.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Nothing further happened until midnight. Then the trumpets sounded. There began the steady tramp of armed men and the sharp, staccato orders of centurions. After that, Cæsar's voice, hard, brilliant, not saying much, but saying it with vigor. Then a shuddering clang as two whole legions raised their shields—a pause, two deep breaths long—and a roar like the bursting of a wave on fanged rocks—

"Ave!"

Short, sharp commands and the clang of shields, as cohort after cohort tramped away in fours toward the harbor. Silence at the end of half an hour, and then a dog howling and screams from a woman prisoner. At last gruff voices and a heavy tread at Tros's door, a glare of torchlight through the crack, a clang as a bronze shield touched another one—and the door opened slowly.

"Come!" said a pleasant voice. Tros, whispering to Conops to keep close behind him, strode out into the torch-glare. The red light shone on the bronze body-armor of a veteran-officer, who beckoned and turned at once, leading through the opening in the prison-yard wall, where half a dozen legionaries sprang to the salute. The two men who had held the torches stayed behind to search the hut for anything worth appropriating.

The officer led toward mid-camp, where Cæsar sat on horseback, erect and splendid in his scarlet cloak, surrounded by a dozen torches and about two-score officers on foot, who were crowding in to listen to his last instructions.

No finer horseman ever lived than Cæsar; he looked like a god in the glare of the sputtering firelight, and the helmeted faces peering up at him shone with enthusiasm. His voice was calm, confident, unforced, and it vibrated with authority.

"Who is that?" he demanded, as Tros stepped into the zone of light. Tros bulked bigger than any Roman near him, standing like a monarch in his gold-edged purple cloak. Sea-water stains and the dirt of travel did not show at midnight.

"Tros the pilot, General."

"What? Has he been put to an indignity? Where is his sword?"

Cæsar frowned, glaring at the faces all around him, but omitting Tros. Some one ran away into the darkness, shouting as he ran. Cæsar leaned forward and spoke to a slave who stood near him with tablet and stylus.

"Write," he commanded: "'Cæsar will ascertain who submitted

Tros to indignity and will punish the offender.' Pilot," he went on, meeting Tros's eyes at last, with a smile that would have mollified an angry woman, "not all of Cæsar's men are as thoughtful for Rome's friends as Cæsar is. On the eve of great events mistakes occur. You will understand that this indignity was not inflicted by my order. The offender shall be called to strict account for it."

The man who had deprived Tros of his sword was standing in the torchlight almost straight in front of Cæsar; he turned his head and looked at Tros brazenly, unblinking, with a faint, sarcastic smile. Some one came running through the darkness and thrust Tros' sword into his hands. The same man gave Conops his knife.

"That is better," said Cæsar. "I don't doubt that now you feel better."

He surveyed the sea of faces.

"Officers," he went on, "learn from this that there is nothing Cæsar overlooks."

With that he pressed his greave against the horse's flank and rode away at a walk, the torchmen marching to his right and left hand and the officers following in a group, their helmets gleaming, Cæsar's scarlet cloak like a symbol of Rome's majesty looming above them.

Tros was not left alone; two officers marched with him, one on either hand, and he knew himself, as they intended that he should, as much a prisoner as ever. Conops was no more noticed than a dog that follows a marching regiment.

All was in darkness along the harbor side, but Tros noticed that the usual beacon fires around the camp were burning as brightly as if the troops were still there.

A nearly full moon shone on rows of ships that had been pushed off from the shore and anchored; only one ship, and that the highest pooped and longest of them all, lay broadside to a wooden wharf, from which a heavy gangplank with handrails reached to her deck amidships.

Most of the officers stepped into small boats and were rowed off to their separate commands, but Cæsar, followed by five of them, rode straight to the wharf and urged his horse across the gangplank, laughing cheerfully when the animal objected.

Two legionaries started forward along the plank to seize the horse's head, but he ordered them back sharply and compelled the horse to do his bidding.

"A good omen!" he shouted, as the horse reached deck. "The gods, as ever, befriend Cæsar!"

"Ave!" roared the legionaries, packed so closely in the ship's waist they could hardly raise their shields; and the soldiers in the other ships took up the roar, until across the moonlit water in the distance came the last dull din of the salute.

An officer nudged Tros, motioning toward the gangplank, so he walked aboard, followed by Conops, and neither man dreamed of going anywhere except to the high poop, swinging themselves up the ladder as if the ship belonged to them. Then men on the dark wharf pulled the gangplank clear, and some one lighted a beacon in the ship's bow.

A man on the poop roared an order at once. Rowers, ready on the benches, thrust their long oars through the port-holes and shoved the ship clear of the wharf.

Then another sharp order, and they swung together in the short, quick starting-stroke, their heads in line resembling the remorseless to-and-fro beat of a battering ram. That illusion was heightened by the thumping in the oarlocks and the hollow clang of metal striking on a shield as some one marked the time.

Cæsar stood gazing astern, with his scarlet cloak wrapped tightly, and a shawl over his shoulders, watching the other ships haul their anchors and follow one by one. There were a dozen biremes, clumsy with engines for hurling stones and shooting volleys of arrows, their great iron dolphins swinging from heavy yardarms and their midship sections looking like a fortress.

But the remainder—nearly a hundred ships—were for the most part unarmed transports and high-sided, heavy-laden merchant-ships with corn, oil, wine, munitions and supplies.

The harbor became noisy with the thump of oars, but there was no shouting, and no light on any of the ships but Cæsar's, where half a dozen men stood by the beacon with sand and water, ready to extinguish sparks.

There was no wind outside the harbor. Cæsar's ship worked out beyond the shoals and waited until nearly all the fleet was clear and had taken station in four lines behind him. Then, in keeping with

Cæsar's usual luck, a light south wind began to fill the sails. He turned at once to Tros:

"Pilot," he said, "make haste now and show me that anchorage on the shore of Britain. I will show you how Cæsar leads Roman soldiers."

Tros went and stood beside the helmsman, a Roman making way for him. There was a great deal of low-voiced talking on the poop, where a dozen officers were gathered; it annoyed him, he was trying to recall what Gobhan had explained about the tides, and to remember where the quicksands lay. He ordered the ship headed up a point or two to eastward, and Cæsar noticed it.

"Pilot," he said, "this is a Roman fleet. Each ship will follow me exactly. Carry that in mind."

Then he turned to laugh and talk with his staff officers. There was excitement in his voice. He was like a boy setting out on a great adventure, although the moonlight shining on the back of his bald head considerably weakened that illusion.

He was the only Roman on the poop who wore no helmet and one of the officers warned him of the night air, so he tied the shawl over his head, and he looked like a hooded vulture then.

"For two years I have longed for this!" he exclaimed with a conceited laugh. "It will interest the Roman crowd, won't it, to see Britons walking in my triumph! They paint themselves blue. We will have to take some of their blue paint along with us to redecorate them before we enter Rome.

"I want it understood that any pearls taken in the loot are for me; I need them for the Venus Genetrix. I will be generous with everything else—you may tell that to the men."

Tros changed the course another point or two to eastward. Cæsar noticed it again. He came and stood beside him, staring toward the coast of Britain, where two or three enormous fires were burning on the cliffs that would have resembled dark clouds except for those dots of crimson.

"Druids at their beastly practices!" said Cæsar.

For a moment he looked piercingly at Tros.

"Some one may have told them I am coming; they are probably burning human sacrifices to ward off the Roman eagles! However, they will find the eagles take their sacrifices in another way!"

Suddenly his mood changed, and the tone of his voice with it; he became even more conceited as he toyed with condescension—he would probably have called it mercy.

"I hope for their own sakes the British will not be foolish. The Gauls have shown them what must happen if they oppose Romans under Cæsar's leadership! Is there any wisdom outside Rome, I wonder? Sometimes I am forced to think not. I trust that you are wise, Tros. I reward as richly as I punish."

He returned to the group of officers and chatted with them for a while, Tros seizing the opportunity to head the ship a trifle more to eastward. But Cæsar noticed it. He came and stood by the helm again.

"Show me the place for which we are sailing," he commanded; and Tros pointed out the highest cliffs that overlook the channel from the British shore.

"Why not sail straight for them, as a Roman road goes straight over hill and valley?" asked Cæsar.

Tros dissertated about tides and currents, that would carry the fleet too far to westward unless they made good their easting before the ebb; and for a moment after that as he watched Cæsar's face he trembled for the whole of his plan and for his friend Caswallon.

"Why not westward?" Cæsar asked. "Those cliffs frown gloomily. To me they look ill-omened—an inhospitable shore. Yonder to the westward, there are no cliffs."

And, as Tros well knew, there were harbors to the westward, where a fleet might anchor safely through autumn storms.

"Swamps!" he answered curtly. "Mud, where ships stick firm until the high tides fill them! Unseen quicksands! Rocks! However —it is your business."

He made as if to change the helm, but Cæsar checked him:

"No, I hold you responsible. You are the pilot. It will be my pleasure to reward or punish."

The wind increased, and the following fleet began to lose formation, the heavily loaded provision ships falling behind and the others scattering according to their speed. Cæsar's ship was fastest of all and was a long way first to reach the "chops," where wind and tide met and the sea boiled like a caldron.

Most of the legionaries, crowded in the waist, groaned and vomited, and Cæsar's war-horse had to be thrown and tied to prevent him from injuring himself.

Then Tros swore fervidly between his teeth, and Conops came to him to find out what was wrong, leaning on the rail behind him, tugging his cloak to call attention.

"Wrong?" groaned Tros. "I am! I have missed the quicksands!"

"Then we live!" laughed Conops. "I see nothing wrong with that!"

But Tros swore again.

"I misjudged the tide. An hour earlier, and all this fleet had—"

Cæsar returned to find out what the talking was about; his sharp ears possibly had caught a word or two of Greek. He stood and stared eastward, swaying, watching where the current boiled around shoals. The moonlight gleamed on the projecting spur of an island that was hardly above sea level.* There was white water within an arrow-shot of the ship's side.

Cæsar stared at Tros coldly and then looked southward for a glimpse of following sails; the nearest ones were sweeping westward; tide, wind and current all combining to carry them clear of the shoals. Tros felt the goose-flesh creeping up his spine.

"You Romans are no sailors," he remarked. "If Rome were an island, you would be a vassal nation. Do you see those shoals? A Roman pilot would have wrecked this whole fleet on them. As it is—"

Cæsar nodded; he could hardly keep his feet on the heaving deck; a cloud of stinging spray burst overside and drenched him; he clung to the rail.

"Let me not doubt you again, Tros," he answered grimly.

Tros laughed.

"Cæsar," he answered, "do you let your troops doubt you? When danger seems imminent, do you let them doubt you?"

"You are a bold rogue," Cæsar answered.

"Yet you live—and I could drown you easily," said Tros, "as easily as any of your men could kill you with a javelin in battle. Yonder is Britain, Cæsar. There are no more shoals."

Cæsar did not answer, but kept glancing from the ship's bow, where a long stream of sparks from the beacon flew downwind, toward the fleet, that had been forbidden to show lights. The rowing had ceased long ago; all sails were spread and glistening like wan ghosts in the moonlight.

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* There was an island at one end of the Goodwin Sands until comparatively recently.

Suddenly a ship a mile astern lighted a warning beacon and changed course westward. Fifty ships answered, and a blare of trumpets, like the bleating of terrified monsters, came fitfully downwind.

"Romans! Romans!" Tros exclaimed. "The Britons sleep deep, eh? Will you blame me if they know now how many ships are coming?" he asked Cæsar, jerking his head in the direction of the crimson flares that dotted the dancing sea for miles around.

Cæsar walked away to leeward and sat on a camp-stool where his staff, most of them seasick, were sprawling on the wet deck.

"He suspected you," Conops whispered. "Master, he was nearer death that minute than ever you brought him. My knife was ready."

Tros made a sound between his teeth.

"Any fool can slay a Cæsar," he remarked.

"What would you have done to him?" Conops asked resentfully. "Was it accident that—"

"I would have given him a true emergency in which to play the Cæsar."

Conops was puzzled.

"Then—then you favor him, master?"

"If I ever should, may my guiding star forget me."

"Then—"

"I gave the gods an opportunity to do their part," Tros went on. "It may be there are honest men on these ships, for whom the gods have other uses than to drown them. Or it may be that the gods prefer a second opportunity; the gods are like men, Conops; they delight in choosing. I will offer the gods a second choice. Bid that Roman yonder to set his crew of duffers hauling on the main sheet, if they are not all seasick. Up helm a little. So."

CHAPTER XII

THE BATTLE ON THE BEACH

It is better to die in battle than to emerge victorious. Is the victor not convinced that violence prevails? How seldom he perceives, until too late, that what he has gained at another's cost is nothing—aye, and less than nothing. But he who dies in battle may have learned that nothingness. When he returns to earth for another existence, he may be wiser. He will at least be no more foolish. Whereas the victorious, convinced by violence, proceed from one stupidity to worse.

But battles happen. They are a consequence of cowardice, not of courage; of deceit and treachery, not of truth and high ideals; of contemptible lies, not of honor and virtue. But they happen, because ye are liars and worse. So face the consequences of your own self-slavery to treasons such as animals believe are necessary. Eat the consequences. Die. And in death ye may advance one step at least, toward the manhood that ye claim.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE wind grew flukey toward morning, and at dawn it died away. The white cliffs of Britain loomed out of a gray mist as Cæsar's men unlashed the coverings of the war-engines and set basketsful of arrows in position.

A doctor moved about among the men reminding them how to apply first aid, and two or three veterans inspected the armor of the younger men. The standard-bearer and his chosen inner-guards stood erect and splendid in the bow, and beside each rower two men stood ready to protect him with their shields and two more to fight for him.

But there was no sign of the fleet. A few lone trumpets bleated through the mist in proof that the ships were not entirely scattered, and the sound stirred the gulls; thousands of them swooped and circled alongside, filling the air with melancholy.

One of Cæsar's staff officers approached him on the poop and, in a voice that every man on the ship could hear, announced:

"Cæsar, we Romans are ready!"

But Cæsar ordered a delay until at least a few more ships should come within hail; so the rowers dipped lazily, just keeping steering way, and the men in charge of the commissariat served coarse dry bread in basketsful.

At the end of an hour's drifting a light breeze scattered the jeweled mist and Britain's cliffs shone dazzling in the sun, hardly a bowshot distant. To seaward the fleet lay spread over a dozen miles of steel-blue water, the supply ships almost out of sight and only eight or ten of the lighter galleys near enough to come within hail in less than an hour; but among those, and almost the nearest of them, Tros recognized the small ship with the heavy fighting top commanded by Caius Volusenus.

Cæsar ordered the trumpets sounded; and almost before the blast reechoed from the cliffs an arrow plunked into the water fifty feet away; whoever had shot it was invisible, but along the summit of the cliff, beyond the range even of the war-machines, there had appeared a swarm of men, who looked like dots against the sky-line.

"There is no beach to land an army on," Cæsar remarked, looking sternly at Tros.

Tros glanced eastward to where, several miles away, the beach was wider and the cliffs gave way to lower and more rounded hills that seemed to offer an opening inland.

"Have you a Roman who could have brought you thus near in the night?" he retorted, pointing. "Yonder you can land—or nowhere. And you had better make a landing this day, for I warn you, I can smell the weather breeding. To-morrow, or the next day, or the next, the wind will scatter all your ships."

As the nearest galleys came within a mile Cæsar ordered the officers' assembly sounded. There was a race to obey the summons, and the first to arrive was Caius Volusenus, stepping out of a rowboat manned by Gauls; he stepped on to the poop and saluted Cæsar.

"I commanded you to bring up the rear with your ship," said Cæsar.

"General, where is the rear?" he retorted, sweeping his arm toward where the fleet lay spread on the horizon.

As he turned his head he spared a swift, wrinkled glance for Tros.

Other small boats arrived, and other ships' commanders climbed up to the poop, eager-faced and looking splendid in their armor, but some of them deathly white from seasickness.

Cæsar, making a great show of consultation, nodding as each man made his swift report, ordered them to signal as many fighting ships as could be gathered in a hurry and to follow him along the coast toward that break in the cliffs that Tros had pointed out.

And meanwhile, Caius Volusenus, working his way gradually out from the group of officers, had opportunity for a hundred words with Tros.

"This is a farce. It will be a failure," he said grimly. "Cæsar will force a landing, because he is Cæsar. I smell defeat. We shall be driven back into our ships. Now, about those pearls."

Tros smiled.

"You left an anchor down there to the westward. Conops and I could recover it," he answered.

"Good. It was a good, new, heavy one. It were a shame to lose it."

Caius Volusenus slipped back into the group of officers and presently returned to his own ship.

Then ten or twelve ships, Cæsar's leading, rowed in double line along the coast in search of a practicable landing place; and Tros noticed that the Britons on the summit of the cliffs had vanished.

They rowed slowly, observing the beach, and before they reached that gap between the hills, where the shingle sloped into the sea at an angle that looked as if beaching might be fairly easy, a small, fast galley overtook them, bringing word that the ships conveying cavalry had become scattered in the night and, finding themselves too near the quicksands with a rising wind and rough water, had put back to Gaul to save disaster.

Cæsar glanced sharply at Tros, who overheard the news and very nearly let a smile escape him. He could not altogether keep the laughter from his eyes. Cæsar beckoned him.

"Your father piloted the cavalry," he said.

Tros nodded.

"If I heard aright, he would seem to have preserved them from the shoals."

"And me from victory," said Cæsar, scowling. Then suddenly he laughed. "Whether or not you and your father are to be given to the executioners, shall depend on the outcome. Pray for my victory, Tros."

But he had grown thoughtful, and when they drew abreast of the chosen landing place he waited until nearly three in the afternoon for the heavier fighting ships to overtake him. That gave the Britons ample time to gather in hundreds to oppose him, waiting for the time being out of bowshot, chariots, horse and foot all massed together, the men nearly naked and armed to the teeth, the stallions neighing and the war-horns braying as party after party arrived from inland.

"Barbarians," said Cæsar in a loud voice. "They will be no match for Romans."

And the legionaries laughed; but Cæsar continued to wait for more ships to arrive, until at last the whole of his two thousand infantry lay rolling within a bowshot of the shore.

But by that time it had been discovered that none except the very lightest ships could approach the shore close enough for the men to jump overboard without the certainty of being drowned in their heavy armor.

The lightest ships were ordered forward, but the Britons charged into the sea on horseback and in chariots and met them with such showers of javelins and arrows that the Romans had to lock shields.

One centurion leaped over the bow, shouting to his men to follow, and twenty of them did, but the Britons rode them down and drowned them, managing their horses in the sea as skilfully as on dry land.

Meanwhile, a score more men had been killed on board ship by arrow fire and javelins, in spite of locked shields. Cæsar ordered the ships back out of range, and the Britons yelled defiance from the beach, showing off, wheeling their chariots like whirlwinds.

But Cæsar ordered the ten heaviest warships into position on his right flank, as close as they could get to shore without grounding, and a hail of rocks and arrows from their engines swept the beach and then the rising ground beyond the beach, scattering the chariots and spreading death.

The Britons scampered out of range, leaving a writhing swath behind them, and Cæsar ordered the lighter ships inshore again.

The Britons wheeled, yelled, trumpeted and charged through the hail of stones and arrows into the sea once more to meet them. Fifty of them boarded one ship by the bow, leaping from the chariot poles and from horseback, and the warships could do nothing to aid in that emergency, for fear of killing their own men. The Britons were all slain, but they wrought red havoc first.

Roman after Roman plunged into the sea, only to be ridden down and killed; for they jumped in shoulder deep and the weight of their armor made them helpless, whereas the Britons seemed to know the very underwater holes and were as active as their horses.

But when a Briton was slain, he floated with the water crimsoning around him, whereas the legionaries with their heavy armor sank; so that at the end of an hour's fighting there were scores of British corpses floating, and some horses, but no Roman dead in sight; and that fact encouraged Cæsar's men.

Moreover, the hail of arrow fire from the warships' engines had had its effect on the British reserves drawn up at the back of the beach to await their turn in the crowded fighting line—for the British method was to rush in and fight until they had a stomachful and then to retire and give fresh men a chance to prove their mettle.

"These Romans are cowards and Cæsar is a fool," said Conops in Tros's ear. "Two thousand Greeks would have landed an hour ago, against twice that number. Watch Cæsar's face. I wager we return to Gaul tonight."

But Tros had hardly taken his eyes off Cæsar, even when the great war-engines twanged and whirred and almost any other man would have been fascinated by the grim, mechanical precision of the gangs who worked them.

But it was Cæsar himself who fascinated Tros. Cæsar in his scarlet cloak was looking ten years younger. His cold eyes were glittering. He stood in one place, motionless, except that his head turned swiftly now and then. His men were flinching and discouraged, but not he.

"Bring me the standard-bearer of the Tenth!" he ordered suddenly.

A small boat went to bring the man, who left his "eagle" in another's hands and came and saluted Cæsar on the poop.

"Who can die better than in Rome's behalf?" asked Cæsar, looking straight at him.

It was a calculating, cold look, but the man smiled proudly.

"None," he answered. "I will gladly die for Rome."

"Lead the Tenth to the shore!" commanded Cæsar. "I will watch you."

The man grinned and saluted, Cæsar merely nodding. Nothing more was said, no other order given; but, as if the eyes of all the fleet had watched that incident, there was a sudden stiffening and an expectancy that could be felt.

The man was rowed back to his ship, and in another moment he was standing in the bow with his standard raised.

In all that din of twanging engines, clatter of the javelins on shields, grinding of sea on the beach and the creaking of cordage, the man's words were inaudible, but his gesture as he courted death was histrionic, dignified, superb.

He made a short speech, raised the standard high above his head, and plunged into the sea, neck deep, working his way toward the nearest Britons, daring the immortal Tenth to let their standard fall into enemy hands.

With a roar and a clanging of shields they plunged in after him, many drowning instantly because the ship had backed off into slightly deeper water and the Britons were there in hundreds, leaping from horseback to swim and meet them where armor was a disadvantage.

The standard-bearer fell, but the eagle passed to another soldier of the Tenth, who carried it farther inshore before he went down and yet another soldier raised it; and by that time shipload after shipload of Romans had leaped into the sea and men were trying to lock shields, neck deep, around whatever standard happened to be near them.

As they worked their way shoreward they had to meet the British chariots that charged in, hubs awash, six fighting men in each, who leaped along the pole between the horses and over the heads of the front-rank Romans, turning then to break up the formation from the rear.

Twice the legionaries quailed and fell back toward deeper water, but Cæsar withdrew the ships behind them, forcing them to stand

and fight, or drown. And in the end it was that, and the British system of rushing forward to engage and retreating to give a fresher man a chance, that decided the battle.

The engines of destruction on the warships swept the beach, making it more and more difficult to reënforce the fighting line, smashing chariots with catapulted rocks and cutting down the horses with volleys of low-flying arrows.

And the legionaries knew their Cæsar; knew that he would let them drown unless they gained the day for him.

So the standards swayed forever nearer to the shore; and in the shallower water they could hold their close formation, although the chariots, with scythes set in the wheel-hubs, mowed them again and again. But they learned the trick of slashing at the horses before they could wheel to bring the scythes in play.

And at last a standard reached the shore, with twenty men around it, and the standard-bearer raised it high to plant it in British earth. The catapults and arrow-engines had to cease fire then, as one standard after another gained the margin of the shore and paused an instant for the men to lock their shields in solid lines behind it.

The legions sang then—they were ever noisy winners—roaring to the British chiefs to lock their wives away because they brought Rome's common husband with them, who would leave a trail of Cæsarlings to improve the breed.

They sang of Cæsar; and they warmed themselves pursuing Britons up the beach. For after a few more chariot charges the Britons withdrew toward the forests inland, carrying off most of their dead and wounded, not exactly beaten, but in no mood to continue the battle.

"Barbarians," said Cæsar blandly on the high poop. "Such people rarely care for fighting when the sun goes down. We will anchor here. Put provisions ashore."

A centurion came rowing out to say that there was good ground for a camp within a furlong of the shore, so Cæsar ordered the picks and shovels overside. Then he jumped his horse into the water very splendidly in sight of the men of the Tenth, who cheered him to the echo, and rode ashore to hear the roll called and to weep and moan over the list of slain—for he was very good indeed at that.

"Anchor here for the night?" said Tros in Greek to Conops. "Cæsar is mad. The gods—"

"Aye, anchor!" said a Roman voice beside him. "Can you pick up an anchor in darkness, Tros?"

Tros turned and looked into the eyes of Caius Volusenus. A small boat rocked alongside.

"Come," said Caius Volusenus with a sidewise gesture of the head.

But Cæsar habitually did not overlook much, even in the hour of victory. A centurion stepped up, who announced that by Cæsar's order Tros and his servant must remain on board the ship. Caius Volusenus cursed the fellow's impudence, but there was nothing to be gained by that.

"He who obeys Cæsar can afford to be impudent," said the centurion, leaning back against the rail and spitting overside. "What nice dry feet has Caius Volusenus!"

His own were wet, and he had a slight wound in the shoulder.

So Caius Volusenus, cursing savagely, climbed into his boat and had himself rowed ashore, while Tros watched the bustle of unloading and studied the sunset thoughtfully. He observed that no ship had more than one anchor out, nor much scope to her cable.

"Cæsar is quite mad," he remarked to Conops pleasantly. "If Caswallon is not so mad, and if he happens to be sober, and remembers, I can see the end of this."

An hour or so later in the deepening twilight, leaning over the stern, he saw three shadowy ships that ghosted westward, three miles out to sea.

They were smaller than the smallest Cæsar had with him, and the silhouettes were nearly crescent-moon shaped, so high they were at prow and stern. His seaman's eye observed how clumsily they yawed over the ground-swell, and how different the oar stroke was from Roman practice.

The centurion also observed them.

"Gauls," he suggested. "Barbarous looking craft—how I would hate to put to sea in them. I suppose Cæsar ordered them to follow the fleet and guide the stragglers, or perhaps to scout, in case the Britons should have a ship or two. But I wonder that he trusts such fishy looking rabble."

"So do I," said Tros, noticing that the three dim ships had picked up a light wind that carried them westward finely.

He said nothing more until a slave came to call the centurion down to the surgeon, who had established a rough dressing station in the ship's waist. Then he turned to Conops.

"Caswallon is not mad. He is not drunk. He has not forgotten," he remarked. "Those three ships were his."

Inland, camp-fires began glowing on the earthwork that the legionaries raised with pick and shovel—they had brought the firewood for the purpose with them on the ships. From the camp to the shore there was a line of sentries posted, but they were invisible; only the clank of their shields sounded as they moved occasionally, and a rising and falling murmur as they called their numbers, each man to the next one.

It was pitch dark, and the full moon not yet due for an hour, when Caius Volusenus came with an order from Cæsar in writing.

"I am to take my ship and pick that anchor up," he said to Tros. "You and your servant are to come and help me find it."

The centurion, with a bandage on his shoulder and his bronze waist-armor laid aside, objected. It appeared that the surgeon had hurt him, for he spoke between his teeth.

"Bite that!" said Caius Volusenus, thrusting the written order under his nose. "He who obeys Cæsar has the last word!"

But the centurion called for a torch and demanded to see what was written, and it was he who had the last word after all:

"Be careful. I am sure that Cæsar would be sorry if you should wet your feet or get hurt!" he sneered, and turned his back before the other man could answer.

CHAPTER XIII

HYTHE AND CASWALLON

Though I have condemned you for brawling, never have I counseled peace at any price. I know but one man meaner than the coward so self-loving that he will not face the consequences of the common treasons against manhood. He is too mean to be worthy of death by ordeal; let him run; let him hide; let him live and be humiliated by his meanness.

But he is a paragon of manhood in comparison to him who might have fought, and should have fought, but dared not fight, and who afterwards sneers at the vanquished.

There is nothing wholesome, nothing good in war except the willingness of each to face the consequences of the mischiefs ye have all wrought and condoned. It is your war and ye made it. Face it like men. There is no peace other than an earned peace worth the having.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

CAIUS VOLUSENUS' galley picked up the same wind that had wafted the three ghost-ships on their way, but it began to blow considerably harder, and Tros, with his eyes toward the weather, chuckled to himself; for a nearly full moon rose astern with a double halo, and was presently so overcast with clouds that Cæsar's camp-fires seemed to grow doubly bright.

There were no lights on the ships that pitched and rolled at anchor, nor any on that of Caius Volusenus; but great fires burned in forest clearings and along the cliffs in proof the Britons were awake and stirring.

Caius Volusenus fretted on his poop, anticipating seasickness and fearing it as some men dread an evil conscience.

"Is this that cursed equinox?" he asked, squinting at the wan moon as it showed for a moment through a bank of clouds.

"A foretaste," Tros answered.

But he was not so sure. He was afraid old Gobhan had miscalculated, for the gale blew fresher every minute and, with a rising sea behind, the galley pitched and yawed like a barrel adrift.

"Keep a lookout for the bearings," he ordered Conops. "Remember that bleak headland and the level land to westward of it."

Conops waited until Caius Volusenus went and lay to leeward vomiting. Then:

"Master," he said in a low voice, "neither you nor I can find a spar tied to an anchor on a night like this. Why not run into the port of Hythe, if we can find the entrance, and seize this ship with the aid of those Britons, and—"

"Because we would have to fight for the ship, and there would be men slain, of whom you and I would be the first, and we have work to do."

"Then what? Are we to wait until the morning, and quarter the sea until we find that spar?"

"I am a liar on occasion," Tros answered. "If I lie like a Greek this night, and you lie like a Trojan; and if Caius Volusenus' brains are all aswim from vomiting; and if his crew is not much better off, who shall know we lie, except we two?

"Look out, then, for the bearings of that spar; for I hate to lie like a Roman, without appearance of excuse. Pick them up soon, Conops, pick them up soon. For if I am ever to bring this wallowing hulk into the wind I must do it presently, before the gale grows worse."

So when they bore down by the great grim headland near where the galley had pitched at anchor while Tros was in Britain, Conops cried out suddenly and pointed to where the moon shone for a moment between black waves.

Tros roared out to the crew and wore the ship around, at a risk of swamping, dousing the sail then and letting her high poop serve the purpose of a sail to keep her head to the waves.

Then Conops tied an oil-soaked bundle of corn sacks to the ship's bow, and in the smooth, slick wake of that he launched a small boat, forcing four of the crew to help him by pretending he had orders straight from Caius Volusenus.

But the Roman commander was in no condition to give orders. Dimly, in between the throes of vomiting, he understood that they had reached the place where the anchor had been buoyed; it certainly never occurred to him that, even if the dancing spar should have been seen, the ship had drifted from it downwind long since, and that no small boat could hope to work to windward.

He groaned and wished whoever came to question him across the Styx.

Had he given orders, it is likely they had come too late; for Tros held the boat while Conops jumped in—then followed in the darkness, pushing off before a man could interfere, and the last they saw of Caius Volusenus was his pale face over the ship's stern—whether vomiting, or watching to see them drown, they never knew.

They had no sail. Their oars were short, and the boat was made for harbor work—an unsafe, rickety, flat-bottomed thing that steered like a dinner dish.

"To the shore!" yelled Tros, pulling stroke, "and when she upsets, cling to your oar and swim for it."

But when a man and a loyal mate give thought to nothing except speed and are perfectly willing to upset if that is written in their destiny, they upset not so easily. It is the men who hesitate and calculate who lose out on a dark night in a stormy sea. Strength, and a vision of what is beyond, work wonders.

So it happened that the breakers pounding on the shingle beach that guards the marshes to the east of Hythe threw up a boat and two men clinging to it, who stood still, shivering in the wind awhile and watched by the light of the moon a ship a mile away that rolled her beam ends under while her crew struggled to make sail and run before the storm.

"May they drown," remarked Conops bitterly, perhaps because his teeth were chattering.

"They will not," said Tros, half closing his eyes as he peered into the wind. "There is no real weight to this. It is a foretaste. It will die before daylight. Old Gobhan was right after all—I was a fool to doubt him. The equinox will come after the full moon. Cæsar's men will ride this out successfully and think they can repeat it when the full gales come. Now—best foot forward and be warm."

Tros wrung the salt water from his cloak and led the way, keeping to the beach where the going was difficult, but the direction sure, swinging his sword as he went along, until he found dry sand into which to plunge the blade.

There was no sound to break the solitude except the pounding of waves on shingles; no light except the wan moon breaking through the clouds; no sight of Caius Volusenus' ship. They could no longer see the lights of Cæsar's camp behind them, but on the hills to the right the Britons had huge fires burning, that made the wind-swept beach seem all the lonelier.

Hungry and utterly tired, they reached the swamp beside Hythe harbor three hours before dawn, and chanced on one of the narrow tracks that wound among the reeds, between which, once, they caught a glimpse of four shadowy ships at anchor, one much smaller than the other three.

But though they hailed, crying, "Gobhan! Oh, Gobhan!" there was no answer; their voices echoed over empty wastes of water, and the track they were following came to an end at a place where a boat had been hidden in the rushes. But the boat was gone.

"Shall we swim for it?" asked Conops.

Tros had had enough of swimming for one night. He roared again for Gobhan and, disgusted with failure, turned to retrace his steps and find another track, jerking his heels out of the soggy mud and stumbling, until suddenly he heard a voice among the reeds ten yards away, and crouched, sword forward. Then he heard three Britons talking, and one voice he thought he recognized.

"I am Tros," he shouted, louder than he knew. A laugh he could have picked out of a hundred answered him:

"Why not call for me? As well cry out for the Sea-God as for Gobhan."

Caswallon broke through the reeds, seized Tros by the hand and dragged him on to firmer ground, where two other Britons, one of them wounded, leaned on spears.

"Gobhan died, say I. The sailors say the Sea-God called him. If you should tell me that the sailors threw him overboard, I would think three times before giving you the lie," said Caswallon. "I knew you would come, Tros. My chariot is yonder. I heard you shouting."

He led the way with long, sure-footed strides to where his chariot waited with at least a dozen mounted men who wore wolf-skin cloaks over their nearly naked bodies.

"I left Fflur with the army, because she can hold them as none else can," he explained. "What do you think now of us Britons? Did we fight well?"

"Not so well as Cæsar," Tros answered.

Caswallon laughed, a shade grimly.

"Two thirds of my men were late. They are not here yet," he added. "If Cæsar's cavalry should come—"

But it was Tros's turn to laugh. He knew the cavalry would not come.

"My father is the pilot for the cavalry," he answered. "He is a wiser man than I—a better sailor. If he has not wrecked them on the quicksands—"

"Yonder with my three ships is a little one from Gaul," said Caswallon. "The Gaul brings word that Cæsar's cavalry have put back into port."

"They will never reach Britain, if my father lives," said Tros; to which Caswallon answered two words:

"Gobhan died."

He seemed to think that was an evil omen.

There was no more talk until they reached a long, low building just outside the town of Hythe, where women were serving mead and meat by torchlight to a score of men who had evidently not been near the fighting.

Caswallon was in a grim mood, with an overlying smile that rather heightened than concealed it, hardly nodding when the new men greeted him, refusing mead, refusing to be seated, saying nothing until silence fell.

But Tros ate and drank; the chieftainship was none of his affair.

"We are beaten," said Caswallon at last, "and for lack of a thousand men to answer their chief's summons. Cæsar has landed and has already fortified his camp. It is your fault—yours and the others' who have not come. I am ashamed."

There was murmuring, particularly in the darker corners where the torchlight hardly reached.

"We defend Hythe. Cæsar fears us, or he would have brought his fleet to Hythe," a man remarked. "He does not fear you, because he knows you are a weak chief. Was he wrong? Has he not defeated you?"

Caswallon made a gesture of contempt, then folded both arms on his breast—and it was naked, as he had exposed it to the enemy.

"Hold Hythe then," he answered. "Ye are not worth coaxing. The men who fought to-day are my friends, and I know them. Ye are not my friends, and I will never know you. But I bid you hold Hythe for your own sakes.

"For if Cæsar learns of the harbor and brings his fleet in here, he will stay all winter; and then, forever ye are Cæsar's slaves. But it may be, ye would sooner be the slaves of Cæsar than free men under Caswallon."

They murmured again, but he dismissed them with a splendid gesture.

"Get ye gone into the darkness, where your souls live!" he commanded.

But a dozen stayed and swore to follow him, and when he had repudiated them a time or two he accepted their promises, although without much cordiality.

"They who fought to-day, have fought. I know them. Ye who have not fought, have to prove yourselves."

And presently, one by one, the others who had gone out at his bidding into darkness began to slink back, until the room was full again. The women brought in mead, and Caswallon consented to drink when they begged him two or three times, but he only tasted and then set the stuff aside.

"And now, Lord Tros—my brother Tros," he said, smiling gratefully at last, "so your father is safe? I am not in debt to you for that life yet?"

"I am a free man and you owe me nothing," Tros answered. "My father is a free man, and his life is his, to give or to withhold until his time comes. And I told you that I drive no bargains, for I never knew the bargain that was fair to both sides; so I give or I withhold, I accept or I reject, as I see right, and let Them judge my acts whose business that is.

"But I warn you: If I live, and if my father lives and is a prisoner in Gaul, I will invite you to help me rescue him. As to what your answer will be, that is your affair."

"I am your friend and your father's friend," said Caswallon. "I have spoken before witnesses."

There was a pause, a long, deep breathing silence, until Caswallon glanced around the room, and said:

"I would be alone with Lord Tros."

They filed out into darkness one by one; but Conops stayed, and Caswallon nodded to him.

"What said Gobhan of the tides?" he asked, and sat down on a roughly carved chair, leaning his head against the back of it. He seemed tired out. "I can wear out Cæsar and his little army. But if more ships come, and cavalry, and more supplies—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The full moon, and the high tide, and the equinox," said Tros grimly. "Three more days, and then the storm will burst. For my part, I would rather that the gods should kill men than that I should be the butcher. How many were slain to-day?"

"Of my side? Three hundred and nine. And of Cæsar's?"

"More than four hundred," said Tros. "That is death enough for the sake of one man's glory and a helmet full of pearls. Are you a crafty liar? Can you lie to Cæsar and delay him while I loose his ships for the storm to play with?"

"How shall I convince him?" asked Caswallon.

"Give him Commius. Promise to give other hostages and to pay him tribute. Promise him pearls."

Caswallon nodded.

"Aye—he is welcome to Commius the Gaul."

"A lie well told is worth a thousand men," said Tros. "Truth is good, and pride is good. But Cæsar measures truth by bucketsful, and he is prouder, with a meaner pride, than you or I could be if we should live forever. Therefore, swallow pride and lie to him."

"That is what Fflur advised," said Caswallon.

"She has vision. Her advice is good."

"And the longships?"

"Will the crews obey me?" asked Tros. "If they slew Gobhan, what will they do to me?"

"You are a man after their own heart. Gobhan was a wizard and they feared him," said Caswallon. "They will stand by you, for I have promised each man coin enough to buy mead for a year."

Tros thought a minute.

"Hide two ships among the reeds," he answered then, "and put all three crews on the third ship. Select the worst ship for me, for you will lose it. See that the men have knives or axes. Then leave me here; fetch Commius the Gaul, and send him to Cæsar with a man you trust, to offer hostages and tributes.

"But don't trust yourself within Cæsar's reach, because he is a craftier liar than ever you can hope to be. He will speak you fair, but he will hold you prisoner if you approach him near enough; and he will march you in his triumph through the Roman streets, if he has to lose a thousand of his men in order to accomplish it.

"Thereafter they will cut your head off in a stinking dungeon and toss your carcass to the city dogs and crows—they keep a dunghill for the purpose."

They talked for an hour after that, and then went and routed out the ships' crews, who had come ashore to drink in Hythe. Half drunk already, wholly mutinous, they challenged Tros, telling him they had no use for autumn storms and still less use for lee shores where Roman fleets were anchored. They had seen enough of Cæsar on their way down.

But Tros smote a captain with his fist and flung the mate crashing through a shutter. Thereafter, disdaining to draw his sword on fishermen, he seized a wooden bench and cracked a skull or two with that, until the bench broke and the Britons began to admire him.

Caswallon looked on grimly, offering no aid.

"For if I help you, Tros, they will say I helped you. It is better that they learn to fear you on your own account," he remarked.

They also learned a quite peculiar respect for Conops. He knew all the tricks the longshore press-gangs used in the Levant for crimping sailors. He could use the handle of his knife more deftly than those Britons used a blade, and it was hardly dawn when all three crews decided they had met their masters, piled, swearing but completely satisfied, into small boats and rowed themselves to one ship, ready to continue to obey their new commander.

CHAPTER XIV

"IF CÆSAR COULD ONLY KNOW"

Ye call yourselves the heirs of this or that one who begat you. I say, ye are heirs of Eternity. What does it matter who saw your triumph? Whose praise seek ye? And whose hatred stirs your pride? Eternity is Life. Life knows. And as ye do, it shall be done unto you. No matter what your generosity, I tell you malice is a mean man's comfort and begets its own humiliation.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THAT ship, with sixty men aboard, was something worse than Tros had ever known in all his sea experience. It would have been bad enough, if he could have put to sea at once, with hard labor at the oars to keep the three crews busy; but a three-day wait, with all provisions short and Hythe in sight, full of mead and women, and no news—but a mystery--and fires along the hills at night was invitation to the Britons to display the whole of their inborn and accumulated zeal for doing just the opposite of what they should.

They knew a thousand reasons why they ought to go ashore; not one for staying where they were. They wanted to revisit the two other ships and make sure all was well with them in the mud berths where they lay concealed.

They demanded money, mead, more food and better; they insisted on new cordage; they proposed to go a-fishing; they fought with one another, with the new knives Caswallon had provided; they refused to make repairs, and pointed out whatever needed doing as a good enough excuse for going ashore forever.

They listened to Tros's promises with leering grins that told of disbelief; and when he scuttled the small boats, to keep them aboard ship, eleven of them swam ashore and yelled from a place of safety amid the reeds to all the others to swim and join them.

That same night the eleven swam back again, reporting that the men of Hythe were a scurvy gang, and the women worse; they proposed to storm the town and burn it in revenge for having been refused free food and drink, and they promised Tros full obedience thereafter, if he would only lead them to the night assault.

And Tros suffered another anxiety, even greater than they could provide. The weather held calm and gray, with varying light winds that might have tempted Cæsar's ships to look for safer anchorage —or might have tempted the cavalry to sail again from Gaul.

He had no means of knowing whether the cavalry had come at last, nor where his father might be; and all that held him from setting sail for Gaul to find his father, was the knowledge that his father would despise him for having left a promise unkept and a duty unattempted.

Thirty times in three days his determination nearly failed him, only to return because he had to show himself a man to Conops, and a master on his own poop to the Britons.

But at last the night of full moon, and an offshore wind that blew the reeds flat. That afternoon there was a tide so low that a man could have walked knee-deep across the harbor mouth. The gulls flocked close inshore, and by evening the sky was black with racing clouds.

By night, when the raging wind kicked up steep waves against the tide, the crew swore to a man that they would never put to sea in that storm even if Tros should carry out his threat to burn the ship beneath them by way of penalty.

Yet he had his way, and even he could hardly have told afterwards how he contrived it. It was Conops who slipped the cable, so that the ship drifted toward the harbor mouth.

Tros steered her for the boiling bar, guessing by the milk-white foam that gleamed against the darkness and the thunder of the waves; and when the ship pitched and rolled, beam-on, the crew took to the oars to save themselves.

Once clear of the bar, in darkness and a howling sea, there was nothing left for them but to hoist a three-reefed sail and pray to all the gods they had ever heard of.

There was no risk of Cæsar's men seeing them too soon, nor any other problem than to keep the ship afloat and close inshore. If the wind should blow them offshore, there would be no hope of beating back; and the oars were useless, with the waves boiling black and hungry and irregular.

The one hope was to hug the beach until they should work under the lee of the high cliffs, where Cæsar's fleet had more or less protection as long as the wind held in the north-northwest; and to that end Tros took all the chances, judging his distance from shore by the roar of the surf on the beach—for he could not see a ship's length overside.

Once he sailed so close inshore and the crew were so afraid, that six men rushed him at the helm, meaning to beach the ship and jump for it; but Conops fought them off, and Tros held his course —in good deep water within thirty feet of shore.*

And presently the crew began to wonder at him and to think him an immortal. When the moon broke through the racing clouds he looked enormous at the helm, with his cloak and his black hair streaming in the wind, one leg against the bulwark and his full weight strained against the long oar.

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* A modern battleship can approach the shore between Hythe and Sandgate close enough for a stone to be thrown on her deck from the beach.

Then the rain came, and the lightning gleamed on the gold band on his forehead. And when he laughed they knew he was a god and he knew something else—that Cæsar's fleet was at his mercy.

For the lightning flashes shone on high white cliffs with foam below them, tossing Cæsar's anchored ships; and he knew old Gobhan had been right about the high tide and the full moon; knew that he, too, had been right when he declared that Cæsar and his men were mad.

For they had beached the lighter ships, and as they lay careened the high tide had reached and filled them. Flash after flash of lightning showed the Romans laboring at cable-ends to haul them higher out of water, while the surf stove in their sterns and rolled them beam-on, while a cable-length from shore the bigger ships plunged madly at short anchor-ropes, without a crew on board to man them if they broke adrift.

So Tros laughed aloud and sang, and Conops chanted with him. And because they reached the lee of the high cliffs it grew a little calmer; but the Britons thought that Tros, being superhuman, had so ordered it, so when he roared to them to shake out all the reefs and man the sheets and stand by, they obeyed him, knowing there would be a miracle.

They hauled the yard up high and let the full force of the wind into the sail, all sixty of them working with a will. Then Tros put the helm up and turned square before the storm, for he had picked out Cæsar's galley, with the high poop, plunging closer inshore than the rest.

"Belay the sheets! Stand by to grapple!" he commanded, bellowing bull-throated downwind.

Conops leaped into the waist to hammer men's ribs with his knife-hilt and drive them aft along the bulwark ready for the crash.

They struck the galley head-on, crashing in their own bows on the Roman's beak. No need then to tell those Britons what to do; they had fought too many Northmen at close quarters. The galley's cable parted at the shock. The sail bore both ships seaward, grinding as they plunged, until the sail split into ribbons and Tros let go the helm at last.

"Jump!" he roared.

There was no need. He was the last man overside, scrambling up the galley's bows as the British longship heeled and filled and sank under the grinding iron beak.

He was at the helm of Cæsar's ship more swiftly than she swung her broadside to the wind. Before Conops could compel the Britons to make sail—they were bent on looting, and the knife-hilt had to go to work—he got control enough, by straining at the helm, to drift across a warship's bows and break her cable, sending her loose into the next one.

Then, wallowing in the trough of steep waves, clumsily and fumbling in the dark with Conops jumping here and there among them, the Britons hoisted sail. And Tros, caring nothing whether the sail held or parted, nor whether he sank the galley and himself too, broke cable after cable down the line until the whole of Cæsar's anchored fleet was drifting in confusion, galley crashing galley, timbers splintering, and here and there the cry of a Roman watchman for help from nobody knew where.

Black night and sudden lightning shimmering on the white cliffs. Darkness again and the crimson of Cæsar's camp-fires streaming down the wind. Thunder of the hollow warships dueling together in the trough between the waves.

Cracking of spars and masts—shouts—panic—trumpet blowing on the beach—and then a roar from Tros as he brought the galley head to wind:

"Three reefs!"

He had drifted too far seaward. There was another line of forty ships he hoped to smash. But though Conops, laboring like Hercules and cursing himself hoarse, did make the Britons reef the thundering sail, he found he could not work the galley back to windward.

So he kept her wallowing shoulder to the sea and watched the havoc on the beach, where men were drowning as they tried to save the smaller vessels.

"Master, for what do we wait?" asked Conops, climbing to the poop to stand beside him.

"For Cæsar!" Tros answered. "I must see him! He must see me!"

But the lightning flashes were too short, and the fires the Romans lighted on the beach too dim and wet and smoky for that perfect climax to a perfect night.

"If only he might know who did this to him," Tros grumbled. "I could die then."

"And your father?" asked Conops. "If we knew that your father was safe," he shouted, with his mouth to Tros's ear. "But if he is Cæsar's prisoner—"

"Ready about!" roared Tros. "All hands on the sheets!"

Conops sprang into the waist, translating that command with the aid of fists and knife-hilt, bullying but one third of the crew because the rest were searching like a wolf pack for the loot, ripping open sacks and using axes on the chests of stores. The twenty wore the ship around, and Tros headed her south by east.

"Where to, then, now?" asked Conops, climbing to the poop again, breathless and exhausted. "Caritia?" *

"In Cæsar's ship? With such a crew? To fight ashore with one or two of Cæsar's legions?" Tros answered. "Nay. I am not so mad as that."

"What then?" asked Conops.

"I think we have given Cæsar all his bellyful. I think he will return to Gaul, if he can gather ships enough—for if he doesn't, Caswallon will destroy him.

"Then I will claim that Caswallon owes a debt to me. I think that he will pay it. He is worth ten Cæsars. He will help me free my father. Find me one of those British captains. Shake him from the loot and bring him here before they ax the ship's bottom loose!"

Conops returned with two of them.

"Gold!" one Briton exclaimed, gasping. "Chests of gold coin!"

"Can you find the way up Thames-mouth to Lunden?" Tros roared, making them stand downwind where they could hear him plainly. For the wind shrieked in the rigging.

They nodded.

"Do you dare it in this weather?"

They nodded again, hugging armsful of plunder beneath stolen Roman cloaks. All they craved now was to take the plunder home, and time to broach the wine-casks in the ship's waist.

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* Calais.

They were afraid of nothing any longer, except Tros; he had not quite lost his superhuman aspect. But he knew the end of that would come as soon as they should broach the wine-casks.

"With a different crew and a south wind I would dare it too," said Tros. "You Britons will never become sailors if you live a thousand years, but I must make the best of you. Do you think, if you were dead, that you could work this ship to windward?"

They shook their heads as if they had not understood him.

"You can do it better with your life in you? Well then, throw all that wine overboard—all hands to it! You have your choice of dying two ways. I will kill the man who dares to broach a cask. And if you think you can kill me and then drink Cæsar's wine, you will all die of a burning bellyache!

"You doubt it? Hah! That wine was meant for Cæsar's gift to Caswallon. He poisoned it with gangrened adders' blood and hemlock! Drink it, will you? Heave it overboard, if you hope to live and see Thames River!"

They doubted him, and yet—he had done wonders; it was hardly safe to doubt him. It was difficult to rig a tackle in that sea. They were very weary.

"Die if you wish," said Tros. "Or make Thames-mouth if we can; for I am ready to attempt it. Choose!"

They elected to obey him and, to save hard labor, broached the wine into the ship's bilge, where not even a rat would care to drink it.

"How did you know that Cæsar poisoned it?" asked Conops, as the empty casks went overside one by one.

"I didn't," Tros answered. "But I knew we could never make Thames-mouth with a crew of drunken Britons. And a lie, my little man, well told, on suitable occasions, sounds as good in the gods' ears as a morning hymn—as good as the crash of the breaking of Cæsar's ships!

"Set ten men in the bows on watch. Bring those fisher captains back to me to help me find the way. Then turn in, and be ready to relieve me at the helm."

He turned and shook his fist at Cæsar's camp-fires.

"Ye gods! Ye great and holy gods! This were a perfect night if only Cæsar could know who smashed his ships! Who has his pay-chests!"

CHAPTER XV

EARLY AUTUMN: 55 B.C.

> It is not victory, which either side may win by chance, but what ye do with victory that weighs for or against you in the eternal scales.
>
> FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

TROS found the Thames. His stolen bireme with a long slit in her sail and half of her cordage hanging overside, lolled on the incoming tide up Thames-mouth. The shore, far away on either hand, was mud with dense forest behind it. Thousands of sea-birds flocked and screamed over the mussel beds, and hundreds followed the ship's wake; but the five and sixty men on board had had no rations for two days, so there was no waste for the gulls to get excited over. The crew was even short of water.

Tros sat on the only water-cask on the high poop, beside Conops who held the steering oar. There were half a dozen sullen Britons in the bow. The remainder sat, chin on knees, in the ship's waist, abaft the low, square citadel.

Tros's amber eyes were heavy from lack of sleep. The gold band across his forehead that held his heavy black hair in place, was awry, giving him a drunken look. His purple cloak, creased and sea-stained, was torn; one slit looked as if it might have been done by some one's knife. The knuckles of his left hand were bruised and bleeding.

One Briton in the ship's waist kept feeling at his teeth, as if to count those that remained.

Forward, on the ship's bow, there were two machines for shooting flights of arrows. There were two more on a kind of citadel amidships and two on the poop. But all except those on the poop had been put out of commission by removing the gut strings. The Britons had no knives nor any other weapons and looked sullenly aware of it.

Conops, after hauling at the long steering oar half a dozen times to keep the ship from drifting beam-on to the tide, cocked his one bloodshot eye at Tros.

"Master, they have not drunk since yesterday."

"Nor I. Nor you," Tros answered.

"Better give them a drink now, master, else I think they will come at us again. They look ugly. They are close to home."

"Aye, too close." Tros hitched his long purple scabbard so that the sword hilt lay readier to hand.

"When a man has been paid off he is no more use until he has spent the money. When a thirsty Briton has had drink—back there!" he roared, striding toward the ladder that led down into the ship's waist.

His hand was on his sword hilt. The Britons retreated and sat down again. But an iron bolt thrown from forward of the citadel missed Tros by the thickness of the whiskers on his dark, determined jaw. He squared his shoulders.

"Bring me that man!" he commanded.

For a moment or two there was no response. Conops let go the steering oar, fitted the iron crank to one of the after arrow-machines and, laying twelve long arrows in the grooves, wound the bow taut. Four of the Britons went then and fetched a man who was hiding forward of the citadel, hustling him aft, toward the poop ladder. He climbed up alone and stood glaring at Tros—dark-skinned, dark-eyed, nearly a head shorter and not so broad as he, but lithe and active looking, with a week's growth of straight black hair on his face and a desperate stare in his eyes.

"What have you to say?" Tros asked him.

"I threw. I missed. If I loved you, I would not have thrown. If I were not parched and hungry, I would not have missed."

Tros laughed, with his hands on his hips and his head thrown back. His was a volcanic "Ho-ho-hoh!" that shook his shoulders.

"That is a man's answer! Hah! I like it. So you love me not? Let us see whether the sea-gods or the gods of Britain love you."

Suddenly he tripped the man, seized him as he fell and, lifting him by arm and leg, hurled him down among the others in the ship's waist, where a dozen of them broke his fall because they could not get out of the way in time. Tros stood, arms akimbo, and laughed again.

"I am a better shot than he was," he remarked. "How many have I hit with one bolt? Six—seven. And the bolt still good for a day's work. Man the oars now, every mother's son of you, before I—"

He made a gesture with his thumb toward the arrow-engine, but his eyes were scanning the northern riverbank. One Briton dived off the bow and began swimming like a seal toward a drifting log.

"Down off that bow, the rest of you!" roared Tros, and Conops took aim.

They had more sense than to wait for a flight of arrows that could hardly miss one of them. They might have hidden forward of the ship's citadel, but panic is uncalculating stuff. They went to the oars instead. Thirty oars on each side went out through the ports and the steady thump and swing began, Tros beating time with his sword hilt on a Roman soldier's bronze shield—Cæsar's own, for aught he knew; it was a work of art, embossed with figures of Alexander of Macedon and his generals, in high relief.

"Now!" he shouted. "Two hours' strong rowing, and I broach the water barrel. You shall drink as you shall row—enough or not enough. My word on it."

Conops no longer had to strain at the steering oar. The galley steered easily with all that way on her. He and Tros watched the swimmer, who was steadily pushing the log in front of him across the tide toward where three crowded, unsafe looking craft had put out from a creek two miles away.

"Better shoot him, master. Of twelve arrows, one would surely hit."

"Aye, but what use, Conops? If he drowns, that is the gods' affair, and his. The men in those boats have already seen us. If they think we are some new kind of northern rover, I like their spunk. If they recognize this for a Roman galley, I admire their spunk still more. It is no child's play, Conops, to put out in skin-covered baskets and offer fight to a warship! And I think these Britons of ours may help us fight them off—plunder being plunder."

"It looks to me as if there are at least thirty or forty of them in each of those boats," Conops answered. "Look! Three more boats. Spunk? They will come close and throw fire into us."

"Not they," said Tros. "What plunder is there from a burned ship? They will follow until the tide turns, or our rowers tire, or until we stick our beak into a mud bank. Then they will try to fight their way aboard, as wolves attack a cornered stag. And it would be no use ramming them," he mused. "That basket-work they build with wouldn't crush; they would simply climb over our beak."

"That swimmer will tell them we are only two, and our crew against us. Turn, master! Put to sea again," Conops urged, making ready to throw his weight against the steering oar.

"Without water enough for a day!"

"But look! There come three more of them."

"Four more, making eight. There will be others as we go up-river. We have but a netted fish's chance, Conops, unless we get a slant of wind. They are all pirates along the riverbank. Unless we reach Lunden and find Caswallon this will be our last journey in this world, little man. Keep her more in midstream; we need the full force of the tide."

Tros went and stood by the poop ladder, watching the rowers. One of them drew his oar back through the port and offered argument:

"What is the use? Our friends come. Wait."

"Out with that oar and row!" Tros thundered. "If you don't, you shall sizzle like eggs on a skillet, for I'll burn the ship before one Briton comes aboard without my leave."

Eight days of thrashing to and fro in storms, from Kent to the coast of Belgium and half way to Germany before they made Thames-mouth at last, had taught them that he did everything he said he would, including the breaking of heads.

They rowed steadily for half an hour, but the galley was heavy; two feet of solid water flopped in her bilge. The pursuing Britons gained, as the rowers could see from time to time, when their heads swung by the oar ports and the galley turned at a bend in the river. He who had been a captain, and was still one in his own opinion, gave tongue again, but this time did not slacken at the oar:

"You are a fool, Tros. You make us work for nothing. They gain on us all the time, and now the river narrows. We have no anchor. When the tide turns we shall drift into the mud, and there they will have their will of us, unless we come to terms. For how can we fight? You made us all throw our new knives overboard."

"Aye, a fool, and none can argue with a fool," said Tros. "I am like the tide, that has not yet turned. Row, you sons of fish-wives! Row! Row harder!"

He resumed his beating on the shield, and then, because the crew was obviously weakening, he broached the water-barrel and, taking the helm himself, sent Conops down to give them drink one by one—Conops with a two-edged knife in one hand and a copper bowl in the other, ready to jump and fight his way back to the poop. The Britons were less afraid of him than of his lion-eyed master.

The drink did the rowers good. But even so the pursuers gained. A rather futile and ill-shapen arrow plunked at the planking of the poop deck and stuck there quivering within a yard of Tros's foot. He called Conops back to the helm, swung the arrow-engine around on its swivel and fired it.

Twelve arrows swept into the crowded boat that had ventured closest. There was an answering yell, but six or seven men dropped out of view below the gunwale and, at once, all the pursuers fell back out of range, presently dividing themselves into two columns that began again to overtake the galley, four long, crowded boats on either hand, with withes erected all around them now, cross-plaited into a sort of screen to protect the crews. They had set up the withe screens incredibly swiftly.

They were unsafe, unseaworthy looking craft, too narrow for the length and having to be bailed incessantly. The men who manned the paddles were inconvenienced by the screen erection around the sides, but nevertheless comparatively safe at anything but very close range, because an arrow would have to be marvelously aimed to strike straight between the withes except by sheer luck. In the bow and the stern of each boat there were skin-clad men who brandished shields and yelled to the paddlers, exposing themselves recklessly and dancing to attract attention.

"They have fought many Northmen," Tros remarked to Conops. "They know how to draw a longship's fire and to protect the paddlers."

"Master, let them have the ship," Conops answered nervously. "While they loot this galley you and I can swim ashore, and then find our way along the bank to Lunden. Our own Britons will cease rowing presently and then—"

"Little man, all Cæsar's pay-chests lie under the hatch in the cabin below us."

"What is gold to a dead man, master?"

"Or death to a live one. Nay, I think we are not far from Lunden."

"But I see more boats," urged Conops. "Look—by the bend in the river ahead of us."

Arrows began humming into the galley. One rower fell off his bench, shot through the eye. The other rowers stopped work and began shouting to the Britons in the boats, who answered with yells and drew closer. Conops let go the helm and jumped for the arrow-engine, twisting at the crank and shouting to Tros to lay arrows in the grooves.

But Tros took a torch from a box beside the water barrel, lighted it at an earthen firepot and brandished it around his head to make it blaze.

"Now," he roared down at the rowers. "Tell those pirates I'll burn the ship unless they haul off!"

He jumped into the ship's waist and stood with his back to the cabin door, just as Conops sent a flight of arrows twanging from the engine. If the ship were burned and beached there would still be one chance in a thousand of recovering the gold, and at any rate he was determined not to let longshore pirates have it. The best place to fire the ship would be in the cabin under the poop, where there was plenty of stuff that was inflammable.

There began to be a lot of shouting back and forth as the galley swung beam to the tide. Some of the rowers jumped overboard and swam for the already overcrowded boats; some stood on the benches to show they had no weapons and would not fight even if they had. Another flight of arrows twanged and whistled from Conops' engine, but the galley's crew yelled to the attacking parties not to answer it.

"There are two men—only two men!" they kept shouting. "Keep away, or they will burn the ship!"

Five or six more plunged overboard, and Tros decided to let them all go; he would be better off without them, better able to make terms. He swung himself up onto the poop, still brandishing the torch, and a spear thrown from alongside slit his cloak. He caught the spear and raised it as whalers hold a harpoon, leaning overside to hurl it through the bottom of the nearest boat, and paused, rigid, in that attitude.

"They run," remarked Conops from over by the arrow-engine. In some way he had jammed the mechanism and was jerking at it nervously. "Likewise, we drift into the mud."

He jumped for the helm and began straining his whole strength against it, with one foot on the bulwark rail, but Tros saw it was too late to keep the galley off the mud bank.

"Let her take it as she drifts," he ordered. "If she buries her beak she will lie here forever."

The galley's oars sprawled this and that way like the legs of a drunken water beetle as she swung round on the tide and settled herself comfortably on the mud.

The hide-and-wattle boats were scurrying away as fast as the paddles could drive them, but fourteen other boats, all wooden, rowed with oars and crowded with armed men, were coming on, downriver, against the tide, and in the stern of one of them, that had a gilded figurehead carved like a swan, there sat a woman, whose fair hair streamed over her shoulders.

"Fflur!"

Tros waved the torch and flung it overboard. There were still about thirty Britons in a cluster in the galley's waist, and Tros had promised that every member of the crew who should stand by faithfully until the journey's end should have a fair share of the loot. Not one of them had been what he considered faithful, and they were not at Lunden yet.

"Whoever fears Fflur, swim for it!" he shouted.

Nine or ten men heeded that suggestion.

Tros counted the remaining men and made the count nineteen, including all three captains of the three crews he had started with.

"Little man, we have the lion's share," he remarked to Conops.

"I would sell mine for one drachma in hand," said Conops.

Then Fflur came, jumping up the galley's side as actively as if she had been born to sailoring, not taking Tros's outstretched hand, until her leather-stockinged feet were on the poop deck. She kissed him on both cheeks, laughing and friendly.

In less than a minute after that the galley was a-swarm with Britons of the white-skinned, fair-haired type, some in peaked iron caps and all dressed handsomely, with their legs in dyed woolen trousers and their long shirts embroidered in three colors. They examined and laughed at everything, ignoring the crew as if they were some sort of inferior animals.

"Keep them out of the cabin below this poop," said Tros. Fflur nodded.

She had been a chief's wife long enough to take hints swiftly. She gave an order in low tones. Four men did her bidding, standing by the cabin door in the attitude of bored alertness that the British climate breeds in gentlemen. They said nothing, did nothing, drew no weapon; but none offered to encroach on their preserve.

Fflur's gray eyes appeared to take in everything, including the slits in Tros's cloak.

"Caswallon will be in Lunden to-night," she said quietly. "Cæsar has left Britain with all his troops, after two battles and some skirmishing. He ordered us to send him hostages to Gaul, but Caswallon has been trying to prevent the men of Kent from doing that. Is this ship stuck fast? The beacon warned us of a Northman in the Thames, and when Caswallon is away that is my business."

Tros answered that the tide would probably lift them off the mud before long, but that he had no anchor. Then he whispered what lay under the cabin floor.

"It is yours," she said promptly, but Tros laughed.

He had a way of smiling, when the laugh was finished, that was irresistible, holding his great head a little to one side and half closing his eyes.

"Life and money are his who can keep them," he answered.

She nodded again.

"Yes. And Britain is his who can keep it. Caswallon is a king still. You helped us, Tros. I will help you."

She went down the poop ladder before Tros could offer her a hand, and into the cabin, he after her. There was hardly more than head room underneath the beams, and the place was crowded with

Cæsar's personal belongings—his bed, tent, chests of clothes, toilet articles and a chest full of memoranda written by his secretary, not yet annotated.

Tros stirred among the tablets and parchments, with his cloak in Fflur's way. Then together they moved the chest from off the hatch and discovered gold in bags beneath it, bags that even Tros found heavy.

There were ten, and Fflur's eyes glistened in the dim light through the partly opened door; but not so keenly as Tros's eyes had blazed at the sight of Cæsar's seal in the box with the memoranda. While she looked at the gold he took the seal and hid it in a pocket in his cloak. Fflur called to her iron-capped gentlemen:

"Put these ten bags into my boat. Guard them."

They obeyed without comment, summoning the inferiors to do the portering, two men to a bag, themselves surveying the proceedings leisurely, arranging among themselves which three should guard the gold when it was safely overside, and which one should wait with Fflur.

He looked like the most casual cockerel who ever lived—a youngish man with a very long, tawny moustache, which he twisted whenever anybody looked at him. He wore a cloak of yellow dyed linen trimmed with beaver fur, and a golden-hilted sword in a scabbard inlaid with gold. There had been a big dent in his iron cap, but it had been hammered out again until only a vague shadow of it showed.

"Anything else?" he asked in a bored voice, that was hardly insolent and yet contained no hint of deference.

Tros gestured toward the chest of memoranda. The Briton ignored him, absolutely, seemed unaware of his existence.

"Take that too," Fflur ordered, pointing at the chest, and the Briton strolled to the door to summon a sailor, who carried the chest overside.

Fflur examined Cæsar's bed and all the other odds and ends that filled the cabin.

"Is Cæsar a woman?" she asked scornfully, opening a small chest of cosmetics that reeked of eastern scents.

"I have heard strange tales of him," Tros answered. "But it may be all that stuff is for the women he meets in his wanderings."

"And this?" she asked, holding up a bowl, in which lay a strange four-bladed knife.

"He has the falling-sickness,* and at such times they bleed him with that," Tros answered. "He has them use a silver bowl because, he says, his blood is Cæsar's, which is blood of the gods, since he claims descent from Venus Genetrix. The blood is laid before her altar afterwards, and then burned with great ceremony."

The Briton in the iron cap returned and was at pains to appear disinterested, stroking his moustache and leaning his back against the door-post. Fflur introduced him at last:

"This is Orwic, son of my husband's cousin. Orwic, this is Tros, my husband's friend, a son of a Prince of Samothrace."

Orwic bowed almost imperceptibly; it was only his eyes that betrayed any real emotion.

"Oh, are you Tros? I saw you smash Cæsar's fleet off the beach eight days ago. I am glad to meet you."

His manner altered. He looked more cordial.

"Were you in that fight on the beach?" Tros asked him.

"Oh, yes."

Fflur added details:

"His chariot was the first into the water. He was the first to slay a Roman hand to hand. It was he who slew the Roman standard-bearer of the Tenth, and he who led the boarding of a Roman galley. He was the last in retreat when the Romans won their landing on the beach. Caswallon sent him with me, in my chariot, to Lunden as a mark of honor."

"I liked the ride with you, of course," said Orwic, looking miserably self-conscious. "Fflur, do we wait here forever, or—"

"Choose twenty of the safest men and put them in charge of this ship, responsible to me," Fflur answered. "I will take Tros and his man to Lunden in my boat. Order all the captains of the other boats to fasten ropes to this ship and tow it to Lunden as soon as the tide lifts it off the mud. Tell them to be sure that the men who came with Tros have food and drink, and say that if a thing is stolen or a man harmed, Caswallon will do the punishing."

"And I?" asked Orwic.

"Come with me in my boat."

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* Epilepsy.

Orwic heaved a deep sigh of relief and strolled out on the deck to issue orders, pulling his moustache and looking languid, as if the mere suggestion of having anything to do bored him to the verge of death.

"A man?" Tros asked, raising his heavy eyebrows.

Fflur met his gaze and nodded, nodded twice.

CHAPTER XVI

LUNDEN TOWN

None can lie concerning nothing. Never hath lived the liar who did not hear, or see, or imagine a truth, that he might betray it. Truth is necessary to a lie as bones are necessary to a man. But concerning any truth whatever, a resourceful, or a reckless, or a stupid man can tell as many lies as there are stars on the face of heaven. Look ye, therefore, for the truth amid the lies that men tell for one sake or another.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

LUNDEN lay amid the marshes in a forest so dense that the nearness of a town was unsuspected until one came on it around a river bend.

Then there was a gray mist on the river and the wooden buildings were wreathed in that and in smoke that rose straight up and hung like a veil between earth and sky. The sunset glowed through the haze as if all earth to westward were on fire, silhouetting the masts and spars of nearly a dozen ships, at which Tros wondered.

He had dozed away a time or two on the long row up the Thames—Conops snored shamelessly, with his head on one of Cæsar's bags of gold—and now, between sleeping and waking, he was not sure at first whether he was awake or dreaming.

"How came such ships to be here?" he demanded, speaking first in Greek, because that was his native tongue, and not remembering to talk Gaulish until Fflur laughed.

Eight storm-thrashed days and nights he and Conops had stood watch and watch over a mutinously superstitious crew, who would have sacrificed them to the sea-gods if they could have managed it.

Now to Tros, with his weary frame relaxed and the rhythmic oar thump in his ears, his head on a seat beside Fflur's knees and good cool mead under his sword belt, it almost seemed as if he had died and were in another world. There was nothing in focus, nothing as he had supposed it should be. However, Fflur's quiet voice enlightened him:

"Those are all merchant-ships from Gaul, and from the lowlands where the Belgae live, and from the cold lands to the northward."

He began to remember, as in a dream, how the longshore Britons had hunted him up Thames-mouth.

"How get they here?"

"None harms a merchant-ship," she answered. "It is only when the longships come in quest of slaves and tribute that there is any fighting, except when the merchant crews get drunk in Lunden and a little blood flows."

"I have been told, and I told Cæsar, that there is no such place as Lunden," Tros said sleepily. "I was told it is a myth place, like the land-locked sea to northward of which a man named Pytheas told two centuries ago on his return from many wanderings."

"Three of yonder ships are from that land-locked sea," Fflur answered.

Tros felt all the blood go tingling through his veins anew, for he would rather journey into unknown lands than be the emperor of all the known ones. Fflur felt, or saw the change in him and ceased smoothing his hair—he had hardly felt it.

"If the Romans knew of this river and this town," he said, musing.

"Too many know," Fflur answered. "Never a year but we must fight a dozen times to keep the Northmen from laying Lunden waste. And that is strange, because we like the Northmen, and they like us. Some we have made prisoners and have given wives to, and they have settled down among us, some even becoming lesser chiefs, and helping to fight their own folk when the longships come.

"In the spring of the year they come, and in the autumn now and then, when their own harvests have been scant and they dread the long dark winter without corn enough to keep their bellies easy, and no seed in the spring.

"And in the spring, if they have eaten all the seed that winter, they come in twos and threes and dozens, fighting one another for the right to enter Thames-mouth first. Then there is red war that lasts sometimes for weeks, and we have been hard put to it at times to drive them forth, but sometimes we burn their ships behind them.

"Once, when Caswallon had been chief not more than a few months, they sacked Lunden and burned it. But he rallied his men, and burned one ship, and sank another and made Thordsen the Northman prisoner—him and all his men.

"So Thordsen rebuilt Lunden for us, using wood and teaching us the trick of chimneys and adze-hewn timber. Caswallon gave Thordsen his own sister to wife, and she lives where the nights and days are half a year long, or so I have been told, but the Northmen are great liars.

"None of us has seen the girl since then, although we hear of her at times. It was after that Caswallon married me. My folk are the Iceni, who breed the best horses in Britain and have fought the Northmen since the world began."

Orwic, who steered the boat, and the three other young bloods, who guarded the bags of gold without appearing to admit, even to themselves, that they were doing anything unusual, betrayed interest in nothing except the wild-fowl that swarmed among the reeds on either bank, commenting on those and naming them, as grebe, duck, mallard, geese, snipe and half a dozen other sorts appeared and vanished.

To listen to their conversation, nothing was wrong with Britain but the vermin that destroyed the game. Twelve rowers labored at the oars, and nodded when game was discussed, but they seemed to disapprove of Fflur's remarks about the Northmen.

They skirted the swamps around Lunden and brought the boat alongside a tiny pier that jutted out into the river where a shallow brook * flowed out between the bulrushes. To their right a low hill rose jeweled in the setting sun, enormous oaks and the roofs of painted wooden houses glowing in a mystery of mist and smoke.

There was a wall of mud and wattle, reenforced at intervals with oaken beams, that curved around the hill and out of sight; and

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* In later years known as the Fleet; nowadays a sewer under Fleet Street, not far from Ludgate Hill.

there were thatch-roofed houses close to the wall, with their backs toward it.

Chariot tracks, some rutted deep into the clay, crisscrossed in every direction toward other houses half-invisible among the trees, but there seemed to be only one regular street, that ran between two rows of solemn and tremendous oaks toward the summit of the hill, where the red roof of a mansion bulked above ancient yews against the skyline.*

There were not many people in evidence, although a number of swarthy-skinned, dark-eyed serfs, men and women, were filling water bags and buckets at the brook and carrying them uphill with an air of having done the same thing since the world began.

But wood smoke came from a thousand chimneys and from holes in thatch roofs, suggesting supper time and plenty. The air was full of the cawing of rooks that wheeled over the trees in thousands, and the lowing of home-coming cattle, with the occasional bay of a hound or the neigh of a horse who heard the corn bin being opened.

"Lunden is a good town," said Fflur, springing out of the boat and waiting for the chariot that came galloping downhill toward them. "The druids say Lunden was a town a thousand years ago, and will be a town forever until Britain disappears under the sea, because the gods know no dearer place and will preserve it."

"The gods will have to show you how to build a better wall," said Tros, eyeing the defenses sleepily.

He had seen walls twenty times a man's height, of solid stone and thicker than a house, go down before the Roman battering rams. But Orwic betrayed interest at last:

"That wall keeps the serfs at home, and the knee-high children within call," he said. "We have the forests and the swamps to fight behind. Time and again we have caught the Northmen in the swamps by felling trees around them. As long as we can hunt the wolf and stag and fox, and know the forest better than the beasts do, it seems to me likely that our wall will serve its purpose well enough. Besides, as Fflur just said, the gods love Lunden."

Tros laughed.

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* Where St. Paul's Cathedral now stands.

"I have heard them say the gods love Rome," he answered, "and I know Cæsar."

"Cæsar is beaten," Orwic answered.

He spoke with an air of calm, assured finality. One might as well have argued with the sunset—better, because the sunset could not have looked bored.

The bags of gold were heaped on the chariot floor. Fflur drove the impatient stallions with Tros beside her, and Conops asleep again beside the charioteer.

But Orwic and the other Britons waited for their horses to be brought, their youth and strength apparently too precious to be squandered on a mile's walk, or perhaps it was contrary to their religion. At any rate, walking was something a man did not argue about, but did not do.

The chariot galloped past a hundred houses that looked as if their roots were in the very soul of Britain, each in its own oak-fenced garden, with flower-beds, bee-hives, stables, cow-sheds, and a great front door of oak six inches thick.

The window openings were screened with linen, loosely woven, grayed and yellowed by the wood smoke. The soft, mouse color of the woodwork was relieved by beautifully weathered paint on doors and shutters, blue, yellow, red—the earth colors that blend with autumn leaves and dew and lush green grass.

The great house on the hill-top was surrounded by an oak fence half a foot thick, but not so high that a tall man could not see over it.

Within the compound there were giant yews clipped into fantastic patterns and almost a village of stables, cow-sheds, quarters for the serfs and barns for the storage of corn and what-not else.

The great door, with the deep, roofed porch in front of it, resembled nothing Tros had ever seen, although in some vague, indefinable way it recalled to memory the prow of a longship manned by reddish-haired, bearded strangers, that he had once seen ostensibly whaling off the western coast of Spain.

"This is the house that Thordsen built," said Fflur, as serfs ran forward to seize the stallions' heads and she tossed the reins to them. "There is none other like it in Britain, although Thordsen told us that in his land all the kings are housed thus. The Northmen are great liars when they speak of their own land—good friends, bitter enemies. We never believe them unless they swear on their great swords, and even so they lie, if they are made to swear too often. But somewhere Thordsen must have learned to build like this."

Women of all ages, from dried-apple-cheeked old hags to young girls with rosy cheeks and skin like white rose petals in the dew, came out to the porch to greet Fflur and to stare at Tros.

Fflur sent them running to prepare a bed for the distinguished guest, and he stared for a while at the great oak-paneled hall, with its gallery at one end and a fireplace big enough to roast an ox whole, with a chair like a throne under the gallery, and spears and shields hung on the walls, and rich, embroidered hangings.

Then they all came back and kissed him one by one, until Fflur took him by the hand and led him to a small room off the great one, with no door between, but a leather curtain dyed and figured, and showed him a huge wooden bed all heaped with furs and woolen blankets.

"Here you are safe among friends, Tros, and you may sleep to your heart's content."

Fflur watched while the women pulled his outer garments off, taking the stained, slit cloak away, and brought him meat and mead, watched them lay a mattress on the floor for Conops, ordered the women away and watched, standing by the curtain, while a great, gray, shaggy hound went to the bedside, sniffed Tros cautiously and then lay down beside him.

Then she nodded, as if the hound's behavior had confirmed her own opinion.

"Sleep until Caswallon comes," she said. "He drives fast. He will be here at midnight."

Food, strong mead and the knowledge that he lay with friends, combined with sheer exhaustion to make Tros almost instantly lose consciousness. But he was first and last a seaman, with a seaman's habit of responsibility. An eight-day battle with the wind and waves had fixed in that portion of the consciousness that never sleeps an impulse to arouse the senses suddenly, all nervous and alert.

He could sleep deep, awaken, and be conscious of his whole surroundings in an instant; then fall off to sleep again when he discovered all was well, his senses swaying as if a ship still labored under him.

The first thought that roused him was the gold. He remembered Fflur's eyes when she first beheld it in the hole beneath the floor of Cæsar's cabin. But he dismissed that, knowing he was helpless if Fflur should see fit to deprive him of it. The gold seemed relatively unimportant with a mattress underneath him stuffed with goose-breast feathers.

Then he awakened suddenly to think of the galley being towed up-Thames by rowboats, to wonder how they would manage when the tide turned, whether they would not moor her out of sight among the marshes and then plunder her, sink her, perhaps, or burn her to destroy the proofs of pilfering.

He desired that galley above all things except one, and even more than all that gold. She was much too heavy and unwieldy, and steered like a house in a gale of wind, but she was strong, with any amount of bronze in her, and there were changes he knew he could make that would render her almost un-Roman, by which he meant almost seaworthy.

However, he remembered that the galley, like the gold, was in the hands of people who presumably were friends.

The next he knew it was very dark and only a faint suggestion of crimson firelight gleamed between the curtain and the wall, making the darkness move a little as the low flames danced on the hearth. There was a coming and going of cloth-shod feet, with occasional clatter of dishes, as if women were spreading tables in the great hall.

There was considerable noise in what he supposed must be the kitchen, several rooms away. But the arresting sounds, that held attention, were the voices of two men beside the curtain.

He had a mental vision of them seated on a low bench with their backs against the wall, and after a minute or two he recognized one voice as Orwic's. Orwic sounded rather bored, as usual, and spoke, when he did speak, as if he were yawning between every other sentence. It was the other man who carried the brunt of the conversation.

"No, Orwic"—Tros heard the words distinctly—"I was not in the fighting on the beach, because a man cannot be in two places. I was at Hythe when Caswallon came to turn out every able-bodied man. He made a fine speech, but all they promised was to hold Hythe, and very few went back with him to fight the Romans.

"I would have gone with him, but I thought of a better idea. You remember what a storm there was three or four days later?

"Well, there was a man named Tros in Hythe, a Syrian or a Greek or a Phœnician, I am sure I don't know which, a big fellow, but a fool, with lots of pluck, who helped me drive three of Caswallon's crews aboard two ships.

"He took one ship, I the other, and we stormed along the coast ahead of the gale until we came on Cæsar's fleet at anchor and crashed into them, breaking the cables.

"Tros was afraid at first, but I led the way and that encouraged him. And he was a pirate born, take my word for it, that fellow Tros was a pirate if ever there was one—hah!"

He had a heavy, sonorous voice that carried distinctly, although he seemed to be trying not to speak loud. Tros, as wide awake now as he had ever been in his life, proposed that Conops should hear too, and reached out with his foot, but Conops was already awake and crouching by the curtain.

"Master," he whispered, creeping to the bedside, "there is a fellow out there claiming to have done what you did!"

Tros laid a hand on his mouth and pressed him to the floor.

"Pirate, you say?" said the voice of Orwic.

"Aye, a pirate! I wish you had been there to see him. He was no sooner alongside a Roman ship than he boarded it and put out to sea. He did not wait to finish the work we had begun—not he!

"He had what must have seemed to him a good ship after that leaky old trap he had smashed on the Roman's bows, and no doubt he knew there was loot in the hold. Anyhow, he put to sea and left me to do the rest of it alone."

"You mean you were all alone?"

"Not quite, but the crew wasn't much good. They were afraid. I did all the work at the helm. You see, it was simply a matter of seamanship and steering straight before the wind.

"Seamanship is in my bones. I was brought up on the South Coast, near Pevensey. I have crossed to Gaul a hundred times, in every kind of weather; and you know my father was a Northman. I sailed downwind and smashed those galleys, wondering why Caswallon had never thought of it. However, I did think; and I live to remind him of it. Caswallon owes me a turn now."

"What became of Tros?" asked Orwic.

"Ask the sea-gods! But I wager he was drowned, and I know those channel waters. The gale shifted and I was driven back toward Vectis,* where my rotten ship went to pieces under me. I crawled out on the beach near by the place where they trade tin to the Phœnicians. But it was a long time before I could find a boat to bring me back to Pevensey, and then I had a hard time getting horses. However, here I am."

"Yes," said Orwic. "And you look well preserved for a man who has done all that storming, and galley-smashing and swimming and what-not else. You look to me, Skell, more like a man who has sunned himself on benches of an afternoon."

"Aye, I have a strong frame and a great endurance," said the gruff voice.

"Orwic!" It was the voice of Fflur now, just a shade excited. "Summon our guest. Caswallon comes."

CHAPTER XVII

A HOME-COMING

Listen to me, ye who judge a horse's value by his paces, I will tell you a man's paces.

He who seeks a violent revenge upon one who has wronged him, trust ye that man never. That one is a coward; he is untrustworthy; he is afraid to trust the Law that in his act of vengeance he pretends to serve. Boasting of right, he does wrong; and he will do you a wrong when opportunity permits.

But beware, and behave justly to the man who, seeing wrong done to himself, is neither humble nor yet vengeful but abides the time that Law shall choose to force the doer of the wrong to make such restitution as is meet. That man's wisdom is like a wheel and its circumference is greater than the earth's rim that ye see around you; whereas vengeance is only a sharp spear that a shield can turn aside and that a turning wheel can smash into a thousand pieces.

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* Probably the Isle of Wight.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Caswallon came by torchlight, standing in a four-horse chariot, with fifty chariots behind him and a hundred mounted men in single file on either side of the procession.

Lunden, man, woman and child, turned out to greet him, though it was midnight, and the windows glowed red behind shadowy trees that seemed afire in torch-smoke. They had Julius Cæsar in effigy hanging from an arch of boughs under which Caswallon must pass—a thing with a long nose made of beeswax and a wreath on its head.

The mist, that deadened voices, spread the light in moving whirlpools that made men seem like specters and Caswallon himself a great god in a golden chariot drawn by monsters.

"The Lunden fog! The Lunden fog!" Fflur exclaimed. "I can't see his face!"

The crowd, on the whole, was silent. Now and then a horn blew. Here and there a woman cried half hysterically, as they lighted the bonfires and the smoky glare increased. Three times a cheer went in waves up-street and volleyed down again, the long, deep-throated, sobbing "Aa-a-a-a-a-h" of men who are too pleased with another man to care to say exactly what they think, a good, back-straightening, gutful sound.

There was a bigger crowd than Lunden had any right to. Men had come from all the countryside, and even from the grassland beyond the forest to the north, where the Iceni raised horses. The Iceni had come south in scores, in the hope of selling remounts to the men who fought the Romans on the Kentish shore, and a group of them, by right of blood relationship, was standing not far from Fflur, all big men, fair complexioned, wearing sleeveless embroidered tunics over their long-sleeved shirts and woolen trousers—friends, in a sense, but not henchmen, and sarcastic when they spoke at all.

Tros, clad in a new cloak that Fflur's women had brought him, stood beside a lean Phœnician, a black-bearded man with a long, hooked nose, wrapped and wrapped again in shawls of camel-hair against the chill of the night, his black eyes red-rimmed, his whole body shaking as he coughed.

He owned the lateen-rigged ship that lay with her nose among the rushes half a mile away and was a prince by British reckoning—no mean man by his own.

Around Fflur there were druids, trousered philosophers in long robes whom Orwic treated with courteous contempt, ordering stools brought for them "lest they should tire out all their righteousness before the time for blessings came."

And behind the druids were the women, nearly fifty of them, fluttering with excitement, some fussing because Fflur had refused to wear hood or cloak.

Fflur's three young children stood beside her, sleepy and wrapped in woolen shawls, but her sixteen-year-old son was with his father in the second chariot behind him, driving his own team and laughing as if it were he alone who had sent Cæsar sneaking back to Gaul.

Fflur's jewelry and her fair hair, beaded with the mist, shone in the flickering torchlight; but when she turned her head a moment it seemed to Tros that her eyes outshone them all and that her face was lighted from within.

"If I should ever find her equal, I would marry," he said quietly to Conops.

But Conops demurred to that: "Master, you would be the slave of such a wife. Freedom is good—the world is full of easy women."

"Aye, and of whoring seamen," Tros answered testily.

Then he saw Orwic, plucked him by the cloak and asked who Skell might be. Orwic, now apparently not bored at all, grew tersely communicative.

The cheering increased in volume as the procession came slowly uphill* to where Fflur waited in the open gateway. There was much more torchlight there, for all the notables of Lunden were on the green common in front of the gate to see Caswallon greet his wife, without missing the burning of the effigy of Cæsar afterwards and all the dancing around bonfires that was sure to take place.

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* Nowadays Ludgate Hill.

They had their serfs with them—two or three serfs to each man and woman—and some of Fflur's own domestics were having hard work to keep the space clear. Serf to serf was simple enough, but Lunden's citizenry took it ill when they were smitten on the shins with holly cudgels.

There was quite a little shouting about freemen's rights, and a couple of dark-skinned serving-men were roughly handled, until Orwic took five other stalwarts like himself and swaggered blandly around the circle a time or two. There was no argument with Orwic. He was roundly cheered and most abominably bored by the ovation.

Then, into the torch smoke and the glare, Caswallon came, holding back the four dun stallions to a plunging walk, until he wheeled them in front of where Fflur stood, threw the reins to the man beside him, and reached over and lifted her in his arms. No fool for ceremony was he, simply a shock-headed gentleman who loved his wife and did not even greet the druids until he had hugged her and kissed his children.

Then the druids crowned him with oak leaves as he stepped down from the chariot. Horns blew a blare that split the ear-drums—for every Briton had a hunting horn—and the crowd called him king!

"King Caswallon! King!"

He turned and faced them in the gateway, laughing, holding Fflur's hand, with the children clinging to his knees, signing to the other chariots to open up to right and left. And then, because the crowd still could not see him, he shook off the children and the great hound that sprang at his shoulders whimpering affection, and, leaping on the gate-post, stood there, upright as a graven image, with his right hand raised until they all grew still.

"Not bad," Tros muttered. "Nay, not bad. That man is fit to rule."

"Men of Lunden," Caswallon said, "and men of the Iceni—for I see a number of you—ye are pleased to call me king, and I am proud to answer you that this our land is free. No living Roman rests on it. Our own dead and the Roman dead lie buried where the sea sings dirges. And I listened to the dirges. And the sea said: 'Again—and again—and again!' And I listened, and the wind blew.

And the wind said: 'I blow sails over the waters.' And the rain fell and I listened. And the rain said: 'He who owns this shall defend it.'

"Then the sea gulls mewed above the surf, and I could see the cliffs of Gaul and the short seas between, and I listened. And the gulls cried: 'Gaul was set against Gaul—*Ohê*—Gaul is Cæsar's!'

"So I think not many new moons shall look down on us before we fight once more. For the Romans come as the springtide rolls up Thames—little by little at first, and then in full flood, with the eagles screaming overhead.

"Now ye are free, and ye have called me king. I am king. But ye shall choose between me and Cæsar before long. Cæsar shall not rule me, for I will die first. I will lie beside those men whose widows mourn them on the shore of Kent. I know a thousand who will die with me, aye, more than a thousand, rather than submit to Cæsar.

"Bear ye in mind: That if ye let a thousand of us die, lacking your aid, in defense of this good land we all call ours, they will have died in vain; and ye who value life more than you do your friends shall learn what a mean and melancholy thing is life under Cæsar's heel.

"Ye men of Lunden, whose chief I am—ye men of the Iceni, whose friend I am, whose chief I am not—I have spoken."

He jumped down from the gate-post, hugged his wife again and led the way into the house, followed by his sixteen-year-old son, and all the owners of the other chariots, many of whom bore Roman shields in proof that they had stood their ground against the invading legions.

He did not see Tros. He was too busy talking with Fflur and his three children and laughing at the antics of the hound that wriggled and yelped in front of him.

At the threshold a young girl gave a golden cup to Fflur, and he accepted it from Fflur's hands, drinking deep and murmuring a few words of ritual before striding into the hall.

There all was horse-play and pandemonium in a minute, as the servants lighted the torches in the sconces and the guests swarmed in to jockey for the best seats at the two long, laden tables, some shoving each other backward off the benches and wrestling on the floor, laughing as they held each other's wrists to keep the little daggers out of play, until a master of ceremonies pulled them apart and placed them at table arbitrarily, threatening to feed them on the floor with the dogs unless they acted seemly.

"Ye are not drunken yet—not yet," he scolded.

The hall was splendid with woven hangings and stags' antlers. Great gold pitchers, marvelously chased, stood at the chief's end of the table. There were silver and golden goblets, and many of the trenchers on which meat and cakes were piled were of solid gold. When they had dragged the throne chair to the table-end Caswallon led Fflur to a smaller chair beside it, everybody standing while the women poured mead into the goblets and every man raised his goblet high, waiting for the chief to give the word to a High Druid to pronounce the blessing.

It was then that Caswallon saw Tros, ten places down the table on his right hand, and paused, almost setting down his golden cup. But Tros shook his head and raised a hand, smiling, requesting silence, catching Orwic's eye next. And Orwic nodded to the chief.

So the sonorous chant of the druids began, and none drooped his head, but raised it because the hymn was of Mother Earth, who uplifts, from whom all human life emerges and to whom full reverence and loyalty and love is due.

There was chant, and response led by Caswallon, until the great beams rang to the refrain and they tossed the cups high, drinking deep to Mother Earth and to the gods who had sent the Romans sneaking back to sea at midnight.

"For let none doubt," Caswallon said, thumping down his golden goblet on the table and following that with a blow of his fist that made the rafters ring, "that the gods sent a man to preserve us! I pay honor to the men who died. I swear fellowship with them who fought and did not die.

"I say that but for the gods who sent a storm, and a true man in the midst of it to harry Cæsar's fleet and break it, we were all dead men this day, or worse, with our wives at the Romans' mercy and our homes destroyed."

He sat down, and there was a little murmuring, because the men who had not fought were at least as proud of British heart and muscle as those who had. Let the druids praise the gods. Themselves were there to toast the men who fought, to eat beef and venison and to drink themselves drunker than the drunkest Roman who ever coveted in vain a good land fit to stay at home in.

Piety—good in its proper place, of course—struck a flat note at a banquet table, and a few men at the far end began a song about the stout hearts of Cair Lunden and the Northmen they had vanquished in the Thames.

Then the women took away the goblets—for they were precious—and put beakers in their place, made of a dull metal that the Britons knew how to blend of tin and iron, and the feasting began in earnest, each man's mouth too full of meat and mead and cakes, and anything else he could reach, to talk at all.

For a while there was no other sound but munching, and the laughing of the girls who poured the mead and took fresh trenchers of hot food from the serfs to the table—for no serf touched the tablecloth or poured a drink. It was Orwic who was first to speak above a murmur, three places down the table on Caswallon's right hand with two rosy-cheeked maids in very close attendance on him.

"We have thanked the gods, who are no doubt gratified," he remarked. "Shall we forget the man?"

Caswallon glanced at Tros and raised his fist to beat on the table for silence, but something in Orwic's eye restrained him. The chief stroked his long moustache instead, caught Fflur's eyes beside him, and waited.

"Skell of Pevensey," Orwic went on, nodding with a dry smile toward a heavy-shouldered man, red-bearded and rather white-skinned, who sat exactly facing Tros, "has been telling me how he destroyed Cæsar's fleet with the aid of a man, who, says Skell, was a pirate. Should Skell not tell that tale to all of us?"

Skell's mouth at the moment was too full for speech, and, it might be, there was a lump in his throat beside; when he tried to wash the stuff down with a draught of mead it made him cough so that the man beside him had to thump him lustily between the shoulder-blades.

There was plenty of time for Caswallon to meet Tros's eyes again. Tros laid a finger on his lips. But Conops, acting serving-man behind his master—to the annoyance of the girls, who would have enjoyed the sport of serving both of them since any foreigner was good to giggle at—leaned over his shoulder, pretending to reach the meat, and whispered:

"Look to yourself now, master, before the mead brews madness. Flout that liar to his teeth before they are all too drunk to understand."

But Tros thumped him in the belly with his elbow, being minded not to let a servant do his thinking for him and aware of how much mead he could drink safely. By that time Skell had finished coughing.

"Skell shall tell us," said Caswallon.

So Skell squared his shoulders and stood, after quarreling a moment with the men on either side, who did not want to let him push the bench back—it caught him in the knees, and a man can't boast to advantage with his knees bent forward between bench and table.

And the tale he told was an amazing one of storm and daring, better by far than what he had told Orwic, because he now had a gallon of mead beneath his belt.

He spoke of himself standing in a British ship's bow—he had stood at the helm when he told it to Orwic the first time—sword-slashing at the cables of the plunging Roman ships; but he said nothing of Cæsar's camp-fires streaming in the gale, or of the shouts of the Roman legionaries drowning in the surf as they tried to haul the smaller ships up-beach, as really happened.

He spoke only of himself, and once or twice of Tros, the lees of a neglected intuition keeping him from some liberties he might have taken with the name of the man who really had done the work.

His egotism stirred by mead, but not yet to the point of actual drunkenness, he told his tale well, when no facts hampered him and he reached the account of his swim from a broken ship to the rock-bound shore of Vectis, in a gale that he had already described as the worst that ever rocked the cliffs of Britain. He described the swimming stroke he used, and how the crew of his broken ship cried out to him to save them:

"But sailors never can swim," he went on, "so the fish had their revenge. But I was sorry for them. When I reached the shore at last, and lay exhausted, I bethought me of that fellow Tros, and for a while I prayed for him to the gods who loose the winds and hurl the lightnings, that I might meet him again and shake him by the hand."

"By Nodens,"* said Caswallon drily, "your prayer was granted. Tros—"

But Tros had already made excuse to leave the room and was standing in the porch outside the great front door, filling his lungs with the clean night mist, and watching the yelling crowd downhill burn Cæsar's effigy in chains.

It was not usual for a host to leave his place at table before all the courses had been tasted, but Caswallon called his oldest son, Tasciovanus, to take his place and followed Tros out to the porch.

And first he embraced him silently, then looked him in the eyes in the light of the horn lantern that hung from the porch beams.

"Tros," he said, "my brother Tros, if it had not been that Fflur received you and made you free of this, my house, I would not have sat still. I would have had you at the table end beside me, next where Fflur sits. But Fflur whispered of the gold, and it lies in her bed, where none but I dares go.

"She spoke of Cæsar's galley. My men shall bring that ship and all that it contains to Lunden. She whispered of what she had heard Skell say to Orwic. And you know Fflur, but you do not know Skell. Her gift I know. She has a second-sight, that forever leads me wisely when I heed her, but I find it strange that you should have sat so still while Skell stole for himself the glory that is rightly yours."

"How is it strange?" Tros answered. "There is nothing for nothing in this world, and I am in dire need. If Skell desires that glory, he shall pay for it, unless you beg me to release the debt, for I am your friend, and I will not make trouble for you."

Caswallon laughed.

"Brother Tros, if you lack anything," he answered, "you have me to look to. But I would rather see Skell put to honest use than receive three favors from the gods."

"Then leave him to me," Tros said, stroking at his black beard, grinning like an ogre.

Caswallon grinned, too, pulling at his long moustache. Like all

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* A sea-god of the Britons, later confused with Neptune by the Romans.

Britons, he admired guile, as long as it observed unwritten rules.

"He is yours—as the gold is yours—and the galley is yours," he answered. "But I warn you: Skell has a dark spirit that is too much even for the druids. He is a doer of evil, a thief of reputations, a crafty coward, whose lies are as bold as his deeds are treacherous. And yet, by promises and what-not else he always has enough friends to keep him out of danger from the druids or from me.

"Four months ago he made believe to uncover a plot to poison me. He struck the goblet from my lips and slew the serf who brought it. I think he poisoned the mead with his own hand, but now he boasts of having saved my life and how can I deny it?

"I sent him to Gaul on an embassy, hoping Cæsar would pack him off to Rome, perhaps. But Cæsar gave him presents, and now Skell boasts he has more influence with Cæsar than an army of a thousand men. If I had killed him for acting as Cæsar's spy, there are plenty who would rebel against me—for Cæsar sends money now and then, some of which Skell distributes.

"Skell was in Hythe when I went there to raise men, and when you put to sea in the storm to break up Cæsar's fleet; but he did not see you, because he did not want me to see him. There was a doubt in his mind then as to whether the Romans might not make good their foothold. No doubt he saw what happened, from the cliffs, and doubtless he believed you drowned, as I did, as we all did, until the beacon told of another Northman in the Thames and Fflur set out to fight an enemy and found you.

"Skell knows I can not swear he didn't put to sea in one of those ships from Hythe, for the one you took, you smashed, and another is missing. It is likely Skell sunk that other one to lend truth to his boast that it was he who did the work that night. It will be hard to prove, for he covers his tracks well sometimes. But what can you want, Tros, with such a fanged louse as this Skell is? He will fasten to you like a limpet to a rock. He will suck you dry."

"He seems even a worse rascal than I hoped," Tros answered. "My father, who is Cæsar's prisoner in Gaul, might not like to come free, if a good man were the victim in his place."

"I had forgotten your father," Caswallon said awkwardly.

"My father may be in chains, and I must make haste," Tros replied. "If Cæsar should learn it was I who smashed his fleet, my father would be made to pay the penalty. Skell seems sent by the very gods."

"You shall speak with Skell."

Caswallon clapped Tros on the shoulder and returned into the house. Tros stood watching the bonfires that had been heaped in midstreet at fifty-yard intervals all the way up the hill. Wild figures like demons danced around them, yelling, with long hair streaming, some waving torches, some holding hands. The mist was crimson with the bonfire glare, distorting things, making men and trees seem nearer than they were, but the din seemed very far away, because the mist refused to carry it.

Tros watched until Skell came out alone and, closing the heavy door with a thud behind him, stood eyeing him in silence.

Very slowly indeed, almost inch by inch, Tros faced him, conscious of his sword-hilt but avoiding any semblance of a move toward it.

"You touch your dagger. Why?" he asked.

Skell blinked at him. His eyes, perhaps, were not yet quite accustomed to the fog-dimmed lantern light. But his throat moved too. He had a face that looked strong rather than crafty, except that the mouth was thin-lipped and a bit irregular. His red moustache was bushy, instead of drooping as most Britons wore theirs. His hair was shorter than the ordinary, and his neck was like a bull's.

"Speak!" he commanded, still clutching at the dagger-hilt. "Why did you not name yourself to me? I am a dangerous man on whom to play such tricks."

The snarl and the sneer in his voice were icy cold. He was a calculator of men's fears, but not so Tros, who liked to turn strength to his own use.

"So I tricked you?" Tros answered.

His voice was almost friendly. There was a laugh in it. He even turned a little sidewise, as if off guard, being able to afford that because he could see the blade of Conops' knife.

Conops had found another way out of the house, a good manservant being better than the best dog, and was crouching in the shadow where the honeysuckle had been blown through the open porch side by a recent wind.

Skell sneered again, his thin lip curling until one side of his moustache pointed almost at the corner of his eye. He said something in a low voice and had to repeat it, because a salvo of applause and laughter in the hall echoed under the porch and drowned his words:

"Do you think you can make a fool of me?"

Tros's amber eyes grew narrow as he judged his man.

"I have heard men lie for many reasons," he said, smiling, and again his voice was almost friendly. "When I tell a lie, it is to save my skin, or possibly some other man's. Boasting gives me no amusement, because I have found I must pay for it sooner or later. Do you pay like a man, or do you bilk your creditors?"

Skell's hand was on his dagger hilt, but he relaxed and leaned against the door, with his head to one side, trying to read Tros's eyes by the lantern rays.

"I supposed you were drowned," he said at last. "There was no harm in taking a dead man's credit. You should have made yourself known if you wanted—"

"Ah-h-h!"

Tros interrupted, with a sudden gesture of his right hand that made Skell almost draw the dagger.

"Does a trader want the skins he sells? Because he does not want them, does he give them without price?"

"Money?" Skell asked him, sneering.

"My price—at my convenience," Tros answered.

And at last he stood square up to Skell, and drew his long sword six inches from the scabbard. Skell did not move, because Conops came out of the shadow then and slapped a blade on the palm of his left hand.

"I am able to care for myself," said Skell, "but I will listen to your proposal."

His heel struck the door behind him twice.

"A third time, and when they open they shall carry you in feet first!" said Tros. "For if I should run a sword point into you, none could blame Caswallon for that. If I should say that I did it, is there a Briton who would blame me?"

"Speak your proposal," Skell answered, "and make haste."

He spoke on the intake of breath, for Tros had drawn the long sword, taking one step backward. Skell's angry eyes recognized a man who knew his own mind on land as well as sea, and knew how not to tell his mind, which is a sign of great strength.

"I have spoken it," Tros answered. "There was no price named when you took my credit for your own gain. Now the credit is yours, for I have no use for spoiled goods. But the price of it is mine. Do I deal with a thief, or with a man who pays willingly?"

"I pay," said Skell, "if you are reasonable."

"Skell," said Tros, "I am so reasonable, I would not give a drachma for your promise, at sword's point or before a thousand witnesses. You shall plight a pledge. Thereto I will add persuasions, since a thrashed horse runs slowly unless fed."

"Pledge? I have neither money nor jewels by me."

"I have money and I have jewels. I would let both go for a friend's sake," Tros retorted. "You would forfeit yours to vent your spleen. Nay, Skell, you shall give a pledge that you will risk all to redeem."

"I think they will come for us soon," said Skell.

He was growing nervous. He could no more stand his ground against a strong will and uncertainty than a bull can face the whip.

"I am cornered; I yield," he said, trying to say it proudly.

"You shall come with me into the hall," said Tros, "and you shall say this: that you have wagered you can bring my father safely out of Gaul, or wherever else he is Cæsar's prisoner. And the stake is your life against Cæsar's galley that they are now towing up the Thames."

Skell made a gesture of ridicule, but Tros continued, speaking slowly:

"They will ask why you made such a wager, for they know you, Skell, and they will doubt your word. You will answer, in terms of what you have already said without my leave, that you and I did a venture together against Cæsar, whereby we are pledged to mutual esteem, but that I seized plunder, and you none, concerning which an argument arose between us, you claiming a share in what I seized, but I dissenting.

"They will believe that tale readily enough. So you will tell them that, you, knowing Cæsar and being fond of daring exploits, proposed this wager to me, and I agreed. Thereafter, Skell, I think it would be dangerous for you to play me an act of treachery, for these Britons are strict about wagers and bargains and the treatment of a guest—I being their guest, remember.

"They will watch me, and they will watch you, so the temptation will be very small to stick a knife into my back, which if you should do, or if another should do, they would instantly suspect you of having done."

"I neither know your father nor where to look for him," Skell answered. "The thing is impossible."

"Skell, so was your story about smashing Cæsar's fleet impossible, since it was I who did that, and you were not there. You will say what I bid you to say, or I will march you now into the hall and name you liar before all the company.

"I see you understand what that would mean, Skell. Your sword against mine, in the fog, before a hundred witnesses. Choose then. I have offered you a chance to win a Roman galley and all the power that should go with owning such a ship, or a swifter chance to prove your manhood with your sword against mine this night."

He did not give Skell long to think, but ordered Conops to open the front door wide, and there they stood, the three of them together with the firelight in their faces, Tros with a naked sword in his right hand, Conops with a naked knife and only Skell with his weapon sheathed.

A roar went up as a hundred voices asked the meaning of drawn weapons, and a bench upset as the feasters faced about. Caswallon rose from his great chair at the table end, and Skell had only time to draw three breaths before he had to answer, for Tros kept still and some one had to speak.

"It seems, in Samothrace men bind a wager by an oath made on a sword blade," Skell said, with a catch in his throat.

Then, because he had gone too far to withdraw, he continued in a loud voice, laying his hand on Tros's broad shoulder:

"This is Tros, who aided me in smashing Cæsar's ships. I did not recognize him until now, but he knew me on the instant. Tros will tell you of the wager we have made."

But Tros was not to be caught so easily. When they had done drinking to him and shouting his name until the rafters rang with it, he stood—his toes beyond the threshold still, because he had not sheathed his sword—and, showing his strong teeth in a grin such as men do not learn the use of without earning the right to it, let loose a "Ho-ha-hah!" that shook his shoulders.

"Nay," he answered. "For you all know Skell, so you shall have Skell's word on what has passed between us."

And he smote Skell such a slap between the shoulder-blades as made him take a quick step forward. Whereat Caswallon, bending his head to catch Fflur's whisper, sat down and called on Skell to speak, and all the company roared to Tros to shut the door to keep the fog outside.

But Tros continued standing at the threshold, and did not sheathe his sword until Skell stood thoroughly committed by his own lips and had vowed before all that company that he would rescue Tros's father, Perseus, Prince of Samothrace, from Cæsar's camp in Gaul or from wherever else Cæsar might have sent him, or die in the attempt. Skell made the best of a bad bargain, boasting with his chin high and with an easy, reckless motion of the shoulders.

"And for my part," Tros said then, "I will gladly give Cæsar's galley to a man so shrewd and brave as can accomplish that."

He sheathed his sword then, and strode in, shutting the great door.

And from then until nearly dawn, while the company, growing more and more uproarious, wove Skell into a net of lies of his own spinning, Caswallon remained very sober, not summoning Tros to sit beside him lest Skell should appear slighted, and he did not care to have Skell sit at the table end.

Skell also remained sober, because the strong mead could not bite a brain that had so much embarrassment to think of. And Tros, who was the son of Initiate of Samothrace, never drank more than comforted the stomach without touching the brain at all, because "drink that dulls the senses," say the Ancients, "is an insult to the Soul, and to refuse the hospitality of strangers is an insult to their kindness; wherefore, wisely observe temperance in all things."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PHŒNICIAN TIN TRADER

> As the wind blows pollen, so are the bolder spirits blown forth by their own necessities and by their own desire and by their courage.
>
> FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

AT dawn, when the company was mostly drunk and Fflur had sent away the women—but she stayed, since none dared offer her indignity—Caswallon strode out to fill his lungs with air and to watch the watery sun rise over the swamps to eastward.

There was a bank of white mist where the Thames flowed, and the tops of oak trees loomed like phantoms through a cloud that blew before the morning breeze. Downstreet, above the smoky embers of abandoned bonfires, was the blackened shred of Cæsar's effigy still swinging from its chain, stretched from tree to tree. In lamplit darkness by the waterside was singing, where sailors from the foreign ships held revelry of their own. And here and there a house light made a pale halo in the fog.

"No need for Northmen to burn Lunden," Caswallon said, yawning and stretching himself. "One of these drunken nights we will do it for them, and that were worse than a defeat. Oh, Lunden is a good town."

Tros, kneeling to wet his hands and face in the dew on the grass before the gate, looked up and laughed at him.

"If Cæsar had known of Lunden, he would be here now," he answered. "In war he is unconquerable if he knows of a point to drive at. Now the boasting is over, how did he really leave Britain?"

"Oh, he used the metal of some broken ships to repair the others, and a few more small ships came from Gaul. And while we made ready to storm his camp he slipped away at midnight, leaving the camp-fires burning."

"He would not have gone," said Tros, "if he had known of Lunden. I know Cæsar. He will write to Rome of a victory, but defeat will rankle in him. It will eat his heart. I will wager you, this minute he is laying plans to try again, and his spies are on the way. The spies will tell him you eat off golden dishes, and that your wife

—Cæsar would rather steal a king's wife and enjoy her shame than play at any other sport the world holds."

"You are as black-haired as a raven, and you croak like one," Caswallon answered.

"I am your friend."

Tros stood up, his beard all wet with dew. Caswallon looked him in the eyes and nodded, then wetted his hands at a yew tree and laved his face in the dew until his long moustache dropped in untidy strands below his chin.

Fflur came then, all new-dressed and smiling, wearing amber jewelry, and twisted the moustache until it hung respectably, then kissed him and called him some absurd name in an undertone.

Two girls and Orwic were in attendance on her, but Orwic was so drunk he could hardly walk straight although he used a spear to lean on, and the girls were pushing him surreptitiously, giggling at his attempts to appear dignified. The only remark Orwic made was that druids were more trouble than they were worth.

"If they drank more and preached less, a gentleman could have more patience with them," he concluded.

Caswallon, with an arm around Fflur, led the way toward a grove of yews within a wooden paling. In a clearing in the midst six druids stood before an unhewn rock, whose highest point faced the rising sun. A druid knelt, peering along the rock and down a vista between the yews, toward where the sun's rim was beginning to appear above the mist.

There were rock seats spaced at intervals around the clearing, with a bank of grass-grown earth behind for less important folk. Caswallon sat on the seat that faced the altar and the others took places on either hand, the women to the left.

"The sun has been up for an hour," said Orwic, hiccoughing. "It's all nonsense waiting for it to touch the top of that old rock. Who cares anyhow?"

But he bowed his head when the kneeling druid raised both hands and those who were standing chanted the orison, each in turn advancing as he sang to lay flowers, corn, honey, earth and water on the altar stone. Then the old High Druid turned with his back to the sun, the others facing him, and blessed them sonorously. That was all.

"Doubtless you do these things better in Samothrace," Caswallon remarked as they filed out.

He seemed in a mood to find fault with anything at all.

"I know nothing better than the best a man can do," Tros answered, "and no hour better than the dawn."

Fflur smiled at that and stroked Caswallon's hand that was on her shoulder, but he turned and faced Tros as they reached the gate in the paling:

"I like that you accepted Fflur's word that the galley and the gold are yours. That you promised the galley to Skell, I do not like," he said abruptly.

"Is it yet Skell's? Has he earned it?" Tros replied.

"Skell never did earn the cost of a horse's bellyful, but he has made me more trouble than I can count," Caswallon said grimly. "You have set the mischief working in his mind. You have forced him to be up and doing. It had entered my thought to kill him for his lies about Cæsar's ships; now I can not kill him, because you have given him the right to make good his pledge before any other man may call him to account. That is our law."

"It is a good law," Tros replied.

"Now Skell will go to Cæsar. And I must let him go, or else discredit you, who have been my friend."

Tros grinned craftily. "The man who claims he wrecked all Cæsar's ships will go to Cæsar."

Caswallon shook his head. Fflur glanced from one man to the other, and Orwic poked with his spear at the tip of Tros's sword.

"You should have gutted Skell last night with that thing," he remarked.

But Fflur was pleased that there had been no murder done. There was seldom a drunken feast without bloodshed afterwards, and she had the name of being too tight with the purse-strings, because she opposed feasting whenever she could make her voice heard.

She suggested it was time to sleep and led her grumbling lord and master by the hand, making the girls laugh by the way she tugged at him as if he were a stubborn horse being led to the chariot pole.

They entered the hall—it reeked of mead and wood smoke and the after-stench of food—where most of the men were snoring on the floor, or on benches against the wall, and the dogs were cracking bones under the table.

Caswallon strode off to his own room, but Fflur went first with Tros to the guest chamber and stood by while he threw out two Iceni who had made themselves free of the bed. Then she kissed him and said:

"Tros, you did well, because you must certainly set your father free by some means. And Cæsar will try again, so you did doubly well, for you are more dangerous to him and a stronger friend to us as long as Cæsar does not know you broke his ships. But he will know it, if Skell should reach him; I suppose you understand that and are counting on Skell's treachery. Sleep well, and at noon Caswallon will have changed his mind."

But Tros did not sleep for a long time. First he sent Conops to find Skell and watch him.

"If Skell goes, I wish to know where he goes, and what reason he gives. Let him not see you are watching him, but make talk with the maids and serving-men and grooms," he commanded.

Then, very shortly after that, there came the old Phœnician trader, still wrapped in his camel-hair, greeting Tros, between bouts of coughing, with courteous eastern phrases, sitting cross-legged on the bed when Tros invited him, and naming himself Hiram-bin-Ahab.

He had gold rings, chased with strange designs, on all his fingers, and a gold band on his forehead very much like the one that Tros wore. They exchanged peculiar signs, and then strange passwords in a said-to-be-forgotten tongue that sounded like challenge and answer or some sort of magic ritual.

After which they shook hands, taking a long time about it, looking straight into each other's eyes. Thereafter they conversed in Greek.

"My son, I am sure now you are not mad," said the Phœnician. "Why did you act like a madman? The Britons keep their secrets well, but even I know Skell lied and that it was you who wrecked Cæsar's fleet. The very maids who wait on table know it. Why did you let Skell take the credit to himself?"

"I take what the gods send my way," Tros answered. "Skell is a mean fish, but I have him in my net."

"Son, you are a stranger in a strange land. I foresmell difficulties.

Skell is an older man than you, and I am older than the two of you together. I warn you, such men as he is are the same the wide world over. Skell—"

"—will run to Cæsar," Tros interrupted. "What else can he do? He fears to fight me. The good gods know it is not in him to keep faith. He has no more thought of rescuing my father than of loving me. Yet he can not lie idle here with that wager on his hands or the Britons will mock him, and he will have no rights whatever—and no peace.

"He must pretend to keep faith. And how can he do that unless he leaves Britain for Gaul? I wish I knew a captain who was sailing for Caritia * presently, and who would take Skell with him."

"Son," said the old man, screwing up his face and rubbing the end of his nose with a lean forefinger, "I would not go near Cæsar for all Cæsar's gold—*keh-keh-keh-khaah,* these fogs!—because Cæsar would take my cargo of tin and would give me for it an order on Rome for money—*phaagh!*"

"Did you obtain tin here in Lunden?" Tros asked him.

"Nay, at Ictis,† where they make it into ingots like sheeps' knuckles. I traded my Tyrian dye and my silken stuff for tin and did well, for the Britons are a reasonable people when they want a thing badly enough.

"Then I came here to hide, because I heard of Roman galleys off the coast of Gaul. You know, if those overbearing rogues catch sight of you they send their liburnians ‡ in chase and ask for all sorts of documents until they chance on one you haven't. After which, if they want your cargo, they just take it. It is all very legal, I don't doubt. They say the Romans are great law-makers."

"And you count on the Roman ships being laid up for the winter now?"

"Surely," he answered. "You know the Romans are no sailors. I have stepped a new mast. My men have made and rove new cordage. The British women have sewed me a sail out of linen that I think will stand the storms off the west coast of Hispania.§ It is a small sail, very stout, with good, wide strapping on all the seams and with

* Calais.

† Some authorities say Thanet, which was really an island in those days.

‡ Liburnians: small, fast boats, very lightly built.

§ Spain.

a stout cord all around the edge of it. My crew have scoured the hull and payed the seams.

"We have food aboard, good dry venison and apples. Those are very good against the scurvy, Tros, and they keep better than our Mediterranean fruit. Water for four months in new oaken casks that have been well soaked to kill the bitter taste. I have raised the freeboard more than half a cubit from bow to stern, using oaken planks."

"Better a big sea on an open deck than a lesser one caught between bulwarks where it can't escape," Tros cautioned him.

"Ah! But I have hinged the planking from above, and the waves can pour off as the ship rolls. You had better come with me, Tros," he said, red-eyed from another bout of coughing. "I have lost three of my men in a drunken brawl by the riverside. I bought three Britons to replace them, but—I will pay you, I will pay you a percentage if you come. I grow old, too old for storming the Gates of Hercules * in winter. This is my last journey. Come with me to Alexandria, you and that one-eyed fellow, Conops, and when I have sold my tin to Esias the Jew, the ship is yours, Tros."

Tros shook his head, grinning kindly.

"I must go to Caritia," he answered. "My father was the pilot who had charge of Cæsar's cavalry. The cavalry never reached Britain. Caius Julius Cæsar will blame my father for that, and justly. My father Perseus is a Prince of Samothrace; he will not lend himself to such purposes as Cæsar's.

"I don't doubt he led the cavalry astray, even as I tried to wreck all the rest of the fleet in the quicksands—I being no Initiate and therefore not wholly averse to drowning a few thousand Romans."

"Your father must be dead long since," said the Phœnician. "Cæsar will have had him beaten to death."

"I think not," Tros answered. "My father is wise in the Mysteries. He would know how to speak with Cæsar. Cæsar might torture him; I have seen him torture others, with fire and ropes and wedges and all manner of cruelty; it was Cæsar who ordered Conops' eye put out in return for a saucy answer. But Cæsar is not such fool as to kill whom he hopes to use. I expect to find my father living."

"He were better dead."

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* The Straits of Gibraltar.

The Phœnician coughed until every sinew of his frame was wrenched and he lay back gasping.

"So you and I might think, Hiram-bin-Ahab. But such men as my father, by the oath of their Initiation, must live as long as life can be spun out, enduring all things. That is a charge imposed on them when they are chosen for the Inner Secrets."

"God spare me from such initiation," said Hiram, coughing again with his face among the shawls. *"Kuff-kuff*—this one last voyage and —*heyh-yeyh*—then I am ready if my time has come."

Tros sat thinking, cudgeling his brain.

"It is early yet for the Roman ships to be laid up for the winter," he said after a while.

"But I will die if I stay here. I *must* go, I *must* go," said the Phœnician, breathing through his nose.

"Then you need a safe-conduct that Romans will recognize," said Tros, slapping his thigh, for a bold idea had dawned on him. "The liburnians might put to sea in any moderate gale and overhaul you. What if I escort you with a Roman bireme all the way to the farthest western limit of the coast of Gaul? If I promise to do that, will you give Skell a passage to Caritia first?"

The Phœnician propped himself against the wall and stared through red-rimmed eyes. The shutter was closed tight, but a dim light filtered past the edges of the leather curtain that hung in the doorway and they could see each other's faces well enough.

"Your eyes are the color of gold, and you do not look mad," said the old man.

"Nay," Tros answered. "And I will pass you by the Romans as far as the corner of Gaul, if you will first pass Skell into Caritia."

Hiram-bin-Ahab turned that over in his mind. His cargo of tin was as good as lost if the Romans should learn of it. They claimed a monopoly of all commerce in tin, because of their own tin mines in Spain and their own need of tin for making bronze for military purposes.

Even if he should succeed in passing the Gates of Hercules undetected, he would still risk being caught in the Mediterranean, in which case he would be made to hand over his tin against Roman promises to pay, promises which he would have to discount with the Roman money-lenders if he ever hoped to cash them.

And all of that Tros understood so well that he could almost read the thoughts passing in the old man's mind. Almost, but not quite. Hiram-bin-Ahab was fifty years older than Tros and could see four sides to everything, plus a fifth that included unpredictable contingencies.

"I see what you intend, Tros," he said, at last, after another long bout of coughing. "You will take that galley and keep far enough to sea to escape detection. But that will not help me if I should run in close to Caritia. They would ask for documents."

"Easy. You shall have them!" Tros exploded.

Hiram-bin-Ahab stared.

"I will give you an order in Latin with Cæsar's seal on it."

Tros's ribs began to shake with silent laughter, for the idea was growing in his mind.

"Silly! A child's notion," said the Phœnician. "Talk sensibly. Skell would tell the Romans all about the bireme in the offing. What then?"

"He will not," Tros answered, "for he will not know."

And he laughed again, because his humor reveled in far-seeing subtleties.

"We have a perfect instrument in Skell. If I say one thing to Skell, and you say another—wait! Your ship is loaded? Water and stores aboard? The crew drunk half the time?"

"Aye, forever drunk, and I can't prevent. They earn money caulking boats and mending cordage for the Britons, and they spend it like madmen along the waterside. They will be fit for nothing until we have been a week at sea."

"Why spend that week at sea?" Tros answered. "The ship can lie at anchor down Thames, with the crew all snug aboard and sobering up. Have you a good mate, or shall I lend you my man Conops? We can trust Conops to keep Skell safe aboard, even if the ship lies at anchor a month.

"Moreover, maybe I can frighten Skell so that he'll be willing enough to hide down Thames on shipboard. Then, when I have made the galley ready, you row down to your ship and wait one more day, making the tide the excuse, or the wind, or whatever you please.

"And I will take the galley on the tide, being careful to pass you in the night-time, so that Skell shall not see the galley, but I will make a signal in passing that you will recognize."

"Madness! Madness!" said the old Phœnician.

But his eyes were brighter than they had been, and his thin lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile.

"And at sea," said Tros, "when you have left the cliffs of Britain on your starboard quarter and are headed toward Gaul, I will put about, discover you, and hoist a challenge in the name of the Senate and the Roman People.

"You douse your sail. You lower a boat and send Conops to me, with two other men. I do as any Roman commander would and keep Conops on my ship as hostage for your obedience; but I send the other two men back with permission to you to land Skell in Caritia.

"Thus Skell will not know I am not a Roman, and you will have a good excuse for landing him in a small boat as swiftly as possible."

"But suppose, then, that the Romans put out from Caritia and search me?" the Phœnician objected. "And they will," he added. "And they will! I know the Romans."

"The officers who put out in liburnians to search ships are not important people who will dare to question Cæsar's seal or act highhandedly with the commander of a bireme looking on," Tros answered. "And now I have thought of a better idea.

"You will wait, tacking to and fro outside the bar until the liburnians do come out, since that will look more regular, and one of the documents that I shall give you will be an authority to proceed to Ostia with tin, under my escort.

"They will see my bireme waiting for you in the offing. And we will take care to persuade Skell thoroughly in advance that you really are sailing for the Roman port, not Alexandria. Thus, if they should ask Skell anything, he is likely to confirm what you say."

"Maybe, and maybe not," said the Phœnician. "Skell would be more likely to tell the truth by accident, if one should depend on him for a lie. He has an evil spirit."

"I can cover that point, too," said Tros. "The man is vain. I can suggest to him that, since you are on your way to Ostia, he should write a letter to the Roman Senate, for you to deliver, recounting his own services to Cæsar. Let him ask for a minor appointment of some sort. He will be so full of that notion, once the thought is in his head, that he will never suspect you of not intending to sail to Ostia."

Hiram-bin-Ahab folded and unfolded his hands in sudden jerks, sucked his yellow teeth and shook his head.

"It is a grave risk. It is a foolish risk, as if the sea and the storms were not enough."

"I have gold," said Tros, and for a moment the old man's eyes looked brighter, but he shook his head again.

"I would not take gold or any payment for a service to a Prince of Samothrace," he answered. "Nay, nay! I am no Roman to put a price on such things."

"But if you should lose your cargo at the Romans' hands, would it be unseemly of me to reimburse you for it with Cæsar's gold?" asked Tros. "I guarantee your cargo, as far as the corner of Gaul, subject to your service in this matter. Moreover, the letter I shall give you bearing Cæsar's seal should pass you through the Gates of Hercules, if there are any triremes thereabout, and should make you free of any port you happen to put into for supplies and water, or repairs. I will forge it skilfully, using good sheep's parchment, of which there is plenty in Cæsar's chest."

"Well, I will have to see those documents before I strike a bargain with you."

Hiram-bin-Ahab frowned pessimistically, but without effect on Tros, who understood Phœnicians as well as he knew Greeks. If the Phœnician had smiled, he might have been in doubt as to the outcome. As it was, he was sure the old man was considering the proposal in all its bearings.

Craftily then, he struck his master stroke, judging his man, giving him full scope without the prejudice of bargaining.

"Hiram-bin-Ahab," he said, "you are old, and you say this is your last voyage. I will forge that document and give it to you, whether you see fit to help me or not. You shall have it freely to help you pass the Roman ports. Now feel free to say yes or no concerning Skell, because I will do what I can for you in any case."

CHAPTER XIX

A SITTING OF THE COURT OF ADMIRALITY: 55 B.C.

There is nothing beautiful or valuable under heaven but that some one wishes to destroy it in the name of virtue. Sons of darkness! Ye believe triumph is a virtue. Ye believe revenge is a virtue. Ye believe it proves your prowess if ye burn the product of another's labor. Ye believe ye burn up evil. Ye are like the dogs—I say the dogs, who bite the stick that smites them. And why are ye smitten? Because ye are blind, who need not be; because ye are proud without reason; because ye forget ye are sons of Light and dig into the darkness lest the Light should burn the shadows that ye love.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

At noon, when as many as had slept away the fumes of mead had eaten, and Fflur had set some women to making a new purple cloak for Tros after the pattern of the torn one he was wearing when he came, Tros asked for the box containing Cæsar's memoranda and went through the documents carefully, whistling to himself.

Now and then he laughed. Now and then he rolled a parchment thoughtfully and stowed it in a small, square wicker basket he had begged from Fflur, and when he had finished he entrusted that basket to her to keep for him.

"There is better in that than a mint," he said darkly.

But as Fflur could not read the Roman script, and especially not the shorthand notes of Cæsar's secretary, she had to take his word for it.

Then Caswallon came, in a great good humor because he had been to the stables, where the sight of new horses had pleased him mightily.

As Fflur had prophesied, he had changed his mind already. He sat on the porch rail, where Tros was listening to Conops' account of how Skell slept at last after whispering with a man who afterward went away toward the riverside.

"Sleeps with one eye open, I wager," Caswallon interrupted, scratching on the porch with the point of a throwing spear. Then, as if the news were unimportant:

"They have rowed that galley of yours to the pool below the ford.* They ask my leave to burn it when night comes. They say there are Cæsar's clothes on board; they want to make a new effigy of Cæsar wrapped in his own scarlet cloak and burn it, galley and all, in mid-Thames. They love a bonfire. What say you?"

"I say what Fflur said, that the ship is mine," Tros answered, trying not to betray alarm.

But Caswallon detected and enjoyed it thoroughly. His blue-stained white skin, his trousers and the spear almost suggested a barbarian, but his easy manner and the quiet smile under the long moustache belonged to a man of many parts, and he could play them all well.

"But you wagered the galley with Skell. Why not dress up Skell in Cæsar's clothes and burn the lot?" he suggested. He looked deadly serious. "Skell would fancy himself in Cæsar's second-best scarlet cloak. We could trick him aboard with the promise of that, and the rest could be recorded as an accident."

"Skell must not even *see* that galley," Tros exclaimed excitedly. "God of fogs and foolishness! Can you think of no better use for a well-found ship than to burn her for fools to shout at?"

Caswallon pulled at his moustache and did not let his hand drop until his face was fixed in an expression of boiled stupidity. He was enjoying himself thoroughly, and so was Orwic, who had got down off a squealing horse to discover what his chief's and Tros's talk was about.

"Use for a galley?" said Caswallon. "If she lay here in the Thames my men would never rest until they had put to sea in her and drowned themselves. They would all be captains and the ship would have to go a dozen ways at once to suit them!

"As for my using her, I crossed to Gaul once in a fair-sized ship, and I suppose I returned, since here I am. I remember I lay on my back to stop the vomiting, but the sea went on pitching victuals out of me.

"When I stood, clinging to the mast, I acted like an eel up-ended, so weak-kneed I was, with the world going round and round and the ship spinning in the opposite direction. It was a rotten waste of good food, Tros, to make no other argument about it. The sea was intended for fish, but I am no fish. For me, not one foot farther than I can ride a horse into the surf. What say you, Orwic?"

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* Just below where London Bridge now stands.

"She would make a fine sight burning with her sail set. There hasn't been such a sight since the Northmen burned Cair Lunden," Orwic drawled.

"Well, come and let's look at her, before they burn her anyhow," Caswallon suggested, adding, as Orwic whistled to the grooms to bring a chariot:

"Wake Skell. Tell him the word he sent that they should burn the galley has reached my ears. Warn him I am angry that he should try to creep out of a wager made at my board by causing the stake at issue to be burned! Bid him keep out of my sight. And then set men to watch him, or he will run before Tros is ready, for Lud knows what.

"Tell the men to mock him for a shirkbet if he shows his face outdoors. Tell the girls to mock him. Tell the grooms he is not to have chariot or horse and let them steal his own two horses from the stable behind his house. Tell him his only chance of being reckoned a man is to take ship very soon for Gaul."

He jumped into the chariot and drove away almost before Tros could swing up beside him, sending the horses headlong over the rear of the hill toward the river, watching their forefeet, taking more delight in them, apparently, than in all the other details of a kingdom.

"For a horse is a horse and you know where his feet will land," he said presently, continuing his thoughts aloud. "But Skell is neither horse nor herring. None knows what Skell will do, except that he will do a mean thing and in some way filch men's praise for it.

"I spoke with Fflur, and she said let him go to Gaul, where if Cæsar whips him none can blame me. Fflur is always right, although I know Skell will offer himself to Cæsar, because there is nothing else left for him to do. I hope Cæsar flogs him and flays him!"

He double-cracked the driving whip over the horses' heads until they galloped madly.

"I hate to own that I dare not throw Skell's carcass to the crows, but that is truth, Tros. He has few friends, if any, but he has bought the loyalty of men who look for more at his hands, and it is not wise just now to stir their anger."

It was no road they took, but a track deep-rutted in the clay where ten-horse teams had dragged sledloads of cord wood and charcoal, and it ended at a ford.

"Where I will some day build a bridge," Caswallon said.

The galley lay in midpool, made fast to an oaken pile that bent like a bow under the weight of ship and tide, and she was in worse shape than when Tros left her, because the twenty men in charge had seen fit to carry all the loot on deck, and there had been some fighting with the crew, who claimed sole right to all of it.

Caswallon drove into the ford until the horses were almost swimming, then roared at the top of his lungs to know whether Lunden had no boats, that a king must get his feet wet. So they brought him a boat and rowed him and Tros to the galley, where the twenty men in charge were all sulky because they had missed the feasting of the night before.

"And not drunk yet," as one of them complained, "although the men who did the towing are ashore and drunker than bees already."

Liquor they had, however. There was an earthen jar of *curmi*[*] on the poop and they were dipping it out with their little peaked helmets.[†] They pledged Caswallon in the stuff, and then Tros, after which they staged a dance in all the Roman costumes they had found aboard, putting Cæsar's scarlet cloak and a golden laurel wreath on Caswallon and dressing Orwic in the bed sheets to represent the King of Bithynia, of whom even Britain had heard. There were some very improper interludes at that stage of the game, of which the druids and Fflur, for instance, would have disapproved.

Caswallon did a very excellent imitation of the falling sickness, much more realistic than the real thing, because he had never seen an actual case of it and only knew Cæsar's reputation, which had naturally been exaggerated.

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[*] A sort of beer, made without hops—for there were none in Britain in those days—producing, according to the Roman writer Posidonius, "pain in the head and injury to the nerves."

[†] Just like modern jockey-caps, only made of iron. They may have been the origin of the modern jockey-cap, since the Britons were a race of horsemen, and Britain is a country in which scores of traditional customs, the wearing of trousers included, have survived until to-day.

They pretended to bleed him in the silver bowl, using *curmi* for the blood, and the ceremony following would almost have shocked Cæsar himself, because they had only heard vague stories about Roman Gods, and the Venus Genetrix had been represented to them as a most improper lady.

They had fired away all the arrows from the two poop arrow-engines at ducks on their way up Thames and, having hit nothing, were of opinion that mechanical contrivances were no good, having already forgotten the dreadful work those engines did in the fighting off the Kentish beach.

And they thought the iron dolphin swinging from the yardarm was some kind of Roman deity hung there to pacify the waves, until one of them cut the halyard—"to introduce the foreign godlet to the good god Lud who keeps the Thames"—and it crashed through the bottom of a boat alongside, sinking it instantly.

Tros did not recover the dolphin until next day, when Conops dived and found the halyard, after which it took a dozen men two hours to haul the murderous contrivance from the mud.

It was only little by little that Caswallon, at Tros's urging, persuaded them to lay all the loot in heaps on the main deck, after which he announced that Tros had promised full and fair division among such seamen as remained of the sixty who had first set out with him.

But Tros and Caswallon had done some whispering, and Caswallon claimed the ship as lawful prize by right of capture, Fflur and his own men having saved it from the river pirates. He declared that was the law of Britain and, since there was no higher court than himself, it did not do the seamen any good to grumble, albeit they did grumble noisily, until some of the gentlemen in peaked iron caps struck them for improper language to their betters.

Then Caswallon held an auction, Orwic acting auctioneer, and Tros did all the bidding, naming what he considered fair prices in view of the state of the market.

The Britons had spent all their money on horse flesh and, except the seamen, who, of course, never had any money, were mostly in debt to the Iceni in the bargain. It was distinctly a falling market, but Tros was generous. The total came to a bigger sum than those seamen had ever dreamed of owning.

Caswallon, after eight or nine attempts, succeeded in dividing the total equally and—what was much more difficult—in persuading them that the calculation was correct. Then he ordered Tros to pay them in gold pieces out of Cæsar's treasure, undertaking himself to change the money into honest British coin from his own mint at Verulam, whereby the seamen learned for the first time what they had missed by failing to kill Tros and throw him overboard at Thames-mouth. And being seamen, they changed their opinion of Tros and began to consider him a right good captain.

By that time it was dusk, and women and children had flocked aboard to laugh at everything, especially at Cæsar's underwear. The women were set to carrying everything that could be carried to Caswallon's house, shields, armor and swords included, and when a new guard had been set over the ship they sent for chariots and all drove home to supper.

But first Tros went alone to the house where Skell lay sulking, a small house, very well built and thatched with wheat straw, two hundred yards away from Caswallon's paling. Some said that he owned the house, and some that he did not, but he lived in it, which was the main thing.

And the seamen, who had followed Tros to get their money, joined with the children and grooms outside, who were pointing fingers at the house and singing a sort of nursery-rhyme about a man who boasted and ran away. It seemed to delight them hugely that Skell's name fitted in the rhyme, and to Tros's ears it sounded something like:

Skell, Skell the Northman's son
Told a lie and away he run!

The sailors would have burned the thatch and pelted Skell as he ran from cover if Tros had let them, not that they knew anything about the facts, but they made common cause with the children on general principles.

Tros found Skell on a frame bed strung with deer-sinews before a good oak fire, at which an old woman was stirring a stew in an earthen pot. He had a cloak over him, and shivered as if he were suffering from ague, but he sat up when Tros entered, offered Tros a stool and threw off his fit of depression along with the cloak.

He was still wearing the dagger, as Tros noticed, and he touched it, which was not good manners; but he sent the old woman for mead and two beakers, bidding her warm it at the fireside when it came, and he had the good sense to make no reference to the caterwauling and insulting song outside.

Tros kept an eye on the hag and on the mead beside the fire, for he knew Skell's reputation and yet did not wish to refuse to drink with him.

"I am ill," said Skell, "and I wish you would cry this bargain off that we have made between us. I am willing to do whatever you say, provided I *can* do it. Name me another tryst that I should keep instead."

But Tros had expected that.

"You are too late, Skell," he answered. "They have brought that galley up the river. Caswallon has claimed it, to hold it in trust until he shall decide the outcome of the wager."

"But I can not cross to Gaul. No ship will take me," Skell objected. "At this season of the year they lay up all the ships in mud berths. Now if you would let me take that galley, Caswallon might consent to that, then perhaps I could get a crew together and—"

But Tros had thought of that, too. He interrupted:

"The galley is unfit for sea, Skell. She needs alterations and repairs, which I will make in good time. But I know a man who will take you to Gaul. He is Hiram-bin-Ahab, the Phœnician, whose ship sails soon."

And then, with both eyes on the hag who warmed the mead, for he knew Skell could not spring at him to use the dagger without the string bed squeaking a warning, he baited a trap into which he felt sure Skell must walk.

"I have a plan, Skell, to make it easy for you to get my father out of Gaul. There is a river called the Seine that flows northwestward into the channel between Gaul and Britain, reaching the sea a good long journey to the westward of Caritia.

"I will take a ship, and there, in the mouth of that river, I will wait for you, so you can deliver my father alive to me without much difficulty, making your way across country in the night-time until you reach the river-mouth."

"But how shall I find your ship?" asked Skell.

The mead was warm enough and would be too warm in a minute, so he signed to the hag to pour it. Tros took the beaker that was farthest from him and held it while the hag poured, withdrawing it suddenly before it was full so that the hag spilled quite a little, after which he watched Skell's face in the firelight.

Skell said the lip of the other beaker was dirty and bade the hag go and wash it, then went on talking in a hurry.

"How shall I find your ship?" he repeated. There was a thin smile somewhere in the midst of his foxy beard. "You will be in hiding, I suppose?"

"Among the reeds and with my mast down, yes," Tros answered. "But ashore, near where I hide, I will set up a cairn of white stones, and if you shout my name three times from there, I will come for you."

Skell's eyes betrayed that he was tempted by the bait, but Tros proposed to tempt a bigger fox than Skell. The man he wanted out of winter camp was Cæsar, the restless aspirant for fame who spent all winter editing a secretary's summer notes.

"I said I would make it easy for you, Skell. Now listen: I have Cæsar's memoranda and his seal, to recover which, Cæsar would set all his prisoners free, to say nothing of my father. I, on the other hand, value my father higher than Cæsar's secret papers, although I have read some of them and there are documents that I daresay Cæsar would be glad to have. What if I should bury that box of documents and seals under the cairn of white stones? Knowing that was there, would you not find it easier then to bargain for my father's freedom?"

"How do I know you would do that?" Skell demanded, trying to look indifferent, but his eyes betrayed him.

"I must trust you, and you must trust me, Skell."

"Yes, we must more or less trust each other."

Tros played his favorite trick then, of raw, cold frankness:

"You see, Skell, I do not pretend to like you. You are a man who did me an ill service. I am compelling you to pay the price for that, and I do not think you like me any better than I like you. I am offering to help you carry out your bargain, because I know that you are not to be trusted otherwise. For my part, you shall have the seal and documents, and the galley, if you deliver my father alive into my hands at the mouth of the Seine within a month from now."

Skell stroked his red beard. He could hear the singing outside, as the fox hears hounds in the covert.

"All right," he said. "Cæsar knows me. He will listen. But I must have money for my expenses."

But again, Tros was not to be caught. He hoped it was true that Skell needed money.

"I will settle with the Phœnician for your passage to Caritia," he answered. "Nothing more than that."

"Then I must have a pledge from you that you will really wait for me at Seine-mouth."

"My father is in Cæsar's hands," Tros answered. "I could not give a more compelling pledge."

"Nevertheless, as you said just now, you and I are not friends. Something of value is needed, to make your word good to me," Skell objected.

The glint of avarice was in his eyes, and a vague look, as if he were hopeful still of finding an excuse to back out. But Tros laughed, kicking his sword-point to the rear and drawing the blade six inches.

"Very well," he said. "You shall have this sword, the best sword in the world, a sword that once was Philip of Macedon's. You shall have it through the middle of your heart, Skell, if you fail to deliver my father at Seine-mouth and I ever set eyes on you again! Is that a pledge you value? Would you like to test it? If so, arm yourself and come outside."

"I can not fight. I have the ague," Skell answered. "When does the Phœnician sail?"

"In a few days. If you go aboard his ship to-night, or to-morrow night, you will be rid of all this annoyance."

Tros jerked his head toward the door, against which clods of earth were thumping.

"They are likely to burn your thatch if you delay," he added. "Shall I tell the Phœnician to send his seamen for your baggage?"

Skell agreed, with a mean, exasperated glare in his eyes, scratching his teeth with his thumb nail, grinning as Tros turned his back to go. But Tros turned again suddenly, because of that dagger and its possibilities, and caught the grin before Skell could cover it, which put him in a marvelous good humor, because he was sure then that Skell was contemplating exactly such treachery as would fit in with his own plans.

So as he left the house he caught a clod of earth intended for Skell's door and pelted one of the children with it. Then, because that frightened some of them—since they knew Tros was Caswallon's friend—he found a lump of chalk and drew a caricature of Skell, beard, moustache and all, on the oaken door and left them pelting rocks, earth, acorns and all manner of dirt at that.

Later, on the grass before Caswallon's porch, he paid the seamen and, as their eyes glinted at the gold coin, he made them a proposal:

"Ye have found me a hard captain but a profitable man to serve. If ye had served me with less knife throwing and with more goodwill, ye should have had the double of all that money."

He picked up handfuls of gold from one of Cæsar's bags and let the coins dribble through his fingers.

"What now if I promise you two for one of what you have received, for one more short voyage before winter sets in? Think of it. Money enough to buy a farm apiece and to live the rest of your lives ashore like gentlemen!"

They agreed, for never sailor lived who did not covet a farm, until he had one. But Caswallon laughed.

"Buy farms? They will buy drink and the caresses of the womenfolk who gut fish by Ludgate wharf!"

"Maybe," Tros answered. "They are no doubt better at that than at seamanship. But they don't spew their victuals overside whenever a ship rolls, and I shall need them when some of your peak-capped cockerels are lying belly upward on that galley's deck praying to the mast and sky to stand still!"

"You will find my cockerels crave money too," Caswallon answered.

"For a venture against Cæsar?"

"Oh! No, perhaps not, not, that is, if Cæsar can be made to foot the reckoning!"

CHAPTER XX

HIRAM-BIN-AHAB STIPULATES

Bargains! Bargains! Listen to me: Who but the highest bidder names the price of that which can be bought and sold? And does Eternity make bargains? Unbidden,. unbought, unpaid for, all the affluence of all Eternity is poured upon you, aye, unceasing. And ye bargain? I will tell you a secret. Though I tell it, it remaineth secret, saving only to the wise; and the wise are they whom Wisdom guideth through the maze of other men's illusions. That which is freely given without thought of recompense, and without stipulation or pity or blame, but given simply from the storehouse of the giver's affluence, whether it be goods or deeds or good-will—that is a free gift. It setteth the giver free and him to whom the gift is given. Because it is a free gift, it is free to go forth as the sunshine and the wind, unlimited by ignorance, envy, greed, ambition and the bonds that ye impose on one another. And I tell you, in all this universe there is nothing as good as freedom. But ye seek to burden to-morrow with the harness of to-day's necessities; and your necessities, I say, are nothing but the shadows of your fear of that very freedom ye pretend to seek.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Tros sat by the hearth in Caswallon's hall, staring with leonine eyes at the fire, reading pictures in it. Caswallon sat beside Fflur, his long legs stretched toward the blaze, his skin, where it showed at neck and breast, looking whiter than ever because the firelight threw it into contrast with the fading blue designs that were drawn on it with woad.

Three hounds slept on the warm tiles. Red apples simmered in the warming mead. Orwic faced the fire with knees clasped in his hands and his back against an upset table.

A dozen men snored on the benches that lined three walls. Wind whined under the eaves, rattling the shutters, and now and then a gust of smoke was blown down chimney, followed by soot and enough rain drops to make a splutter.

"Of what are you thinking?" asked Fflur.

She had been watching Tros, marveling at his strength and at his brow under the black hair, that was as splendid as the carving of an ancient king's.

"Of Skell, of Cæsar, of you," Tros answered.

"What of Skell? You named him first."

"He will go to Cæsar, saying that I, Tros, son of Perseus, am the man who wrecked that fleet off the shore of Kent. That I, Tros, have bribed him with the promise of Cæsar's own galley, to go to Cæsar and make terms for my father's freedom.

"That I, Tros, will be waiting at Seine-mouth for my father to be delivered to me, having with me Cæsar's own seal and Cæsar's chest containing all his private memoranda.

"He will say to Cæsar. 'Make haste! Set an ambush at Seine-mouth! Thus you will recover your seal and documents, and will have two prisoners instead of one—one of whom knows much about Caswallon and the Britons!' Thereafter, Skell will say, 'Reward me commensurately with the dignity and sense of justice of a Roman Imperator to whom important service has been done.' Thus Skell will speak to Cæsar."

"And Cæsar?" asked Fflur.

"He will listen, and smile. He will see through Skell as readily as you see through a serf who comes telling tales about the kitchen wenches. He will ask whether Skell has seen the seal and documents; and he will not be sure whether to believe Skell when that foxy-haired liar says Yes.

"But Cæsar is a restless man, and by that time he will have grown tired of a woman, that being his habit; and maybe there will be no other woman there just then who pleases him. He likes them educated, entertaining. He grows difficult to please. He will bethink him that the Gauls along the coast might be caught brewing mischief if he should pay them an unexpected visit, for he knows the Gauls squirm under his heel. It will occur to him that life in camp is stupid, more particularly to a man of scholarly mind who has lost his secretary's notes.

"And he will remember that among those notes are some that would be very dangerous to him, if they should happen to reach Rome or fall into the hands of one of his own lieutenants, who might have brains enough to use them. So he will not dare to send a subordinate to Seine-mouth; he will go in person, with a cohort or perhaps two cohorts of cavalry, moving secretly and very swiftly, as his habit is. At Seine-mouth he will lie in wait for me."

"And me?" asked Fflur.

"Skell will tell Cæsar of you. To suck himself into Cæsar's good grace, he will fill Cæsar's mind so full of you that Cæsar will never rest until he shall have made you prisoner. And that is why I need Orwic and as many other young blades as will endure the sea a while and pledge themselves to obey me. If my good fortune holds, Fflur shall have Cæsar and hold him to ransom!"

"By Lud of Lunden, nay!" Caswallon swore. "If Cæsar again sets foot in Britain, he shall die here. I will give him his choice of weapons, and he shall fight me, without armor, before all my men."

"He will choose scent bottles and powder puffs," said Orwic, glancing at Cæsar's neat case of cosmetics that Tros had bestowed on Fflur. "I like this venture against Cæsar, though I hate the sea. Say more about it."

"Is not all said, except what the gods shall say to it?" Tros answered. "We have the galley. We must fit her like a well-found Roman warship straight from Ostia with a despatch for Cæsar from the Roman Senate. The despatch, you understand, calls for delivery of my father, Perseus, Prince of Samothrace, who is to be taken to Rome for trial on charges of conspiracy against the Senate and the Roman People, which is how all those robbers refer to themselves.

"First we set Skell ashore, and he talks. When we return, Cæsar will not be there, because he will have gone to wait for me at Seinemouth, hoping to catch me. I, commander of the bireme, deliver the despatch by Hiram-bin-Ahab, the Phœnician, and will not wait, but order it to be opened by whoever is in command in Caritia, declaring I am in great haste to return to Rome because of winter storms."

"If I were a Roman in Caritia," said Orwic, "I would ask why you had not delivered that demand for Perseus when you came the first time. The Romans will think it strange that you should return with a message which you might just as easily have sent ashore with Skell."

"You don't know the Romans," Tros answered. "In the first place, they will never dream that one of their biremes might fall into the hands of an enemy who could use it. They think Cæsar's galley was sunk when his fleet was destroyed off Kent.

"In the second place, Hiram-bin-Ahab shall say the omens were unfavorable when I came the first time. Romans are mad on the subject of omens. Furthermore, Hiram-bin-Ahab shall say that I did not, nor do I, care to bring my crew too near the shore, for fear of desertions, they having grown discontented because of contrary winds, much labor at the oars and scurvy.

"Omens, tides, contrary winds, scurvy, they know those well. That list will satisfy their curiosity."

"It wouldn't mine," said Orwic. "But perhaps we Britons are less stupid than the Romans. Lud knows, they were stupid enough in the fighting at Kent. They won the first battle by being too stupid to know they were beaten! What if their liburnians, as you call them, should come out to investigate you?"

Tros, who was an opportunist first and last and liked to fit his plans to each emergency as it arose, began to wish he had worked out the details thoroughly before taking Britons into his confidence. They were good friends, and generous enthusiasts, but so full of their own superiority to foreigners of any kind that a man needed all his wit to manage them.

Orwic began suggesting wild plans of his own, that included loading horses on the galley, sailing to Caritia and setting fire to Cæsar's camp.

"And if we do that at night, we can ride 'em down in darkness as they run downwind in a panic!"

"I have it!" Tros slapped his thigh so suddenly he woke the dogs. "The first time Hiram-bin-Ahab puts in to Caritia, he lands Skell and says I wait offshore because I suspect my crew of sickening with smallpox.

"My name for the occasion, let us say, is Caius Marius Poseidonius. The Phœnican shows an order signed by Caius Marius Poseidonius, commander of the bireme, authorizing him to land Skell in Caritia. And he, also, prefers not to stay in port because his men who visited my galley may have caught the sickness."

"Good," Caswallon nodded. "That should satisfy them. The worst plague we ever had was caught from a ship. We burned the ship and slew the crew, kindly and with dignity. The druids saw to that; but the sickness spread all over Britain, because the Iceni carried it north on their way home from selling horses. The Romans will want none of that stuff."

"And Cæsar," said Tros, "will have another good excuse to leave

Caritia. He is afraid of smallpox. He will think Hiram-bin-Ahab may have brought it into port. He will certainly go that same night, very likely throwing Skell into a pest-house under observation of the surgeons, who will set fire to the hut and say it was an accident. Cæsar will go that very day to Seine-mouth to investigate Skell's story."

Fflur nodded, and nodded, and nodded, her gray eyes watching Tros. Caswallon held a finger up for silence; he knew that mood of hers. But all she said was, "You are right now, Tros."

"And when I appear the second time," said Tros, "Hiram-bin-Ahab shall say I have seen Cæsar at a place along the coast. He shall add, it is true about smallpox. They will understand that Cæsar wishes to kill my father Perseus without risk of being blamed for it. They will put him aboard Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship and order Hiram-bin-Ahab out of harbor with all speed."

"If the druids had more sense and less sanctity," said Orwic, "they might visit some real smallpox on the Romans. Why can't they do an honest day's work against Britain's enemies, instead of pulling long faces at the sunrise? I believe in results. By Lud's ill-smelling mud," he went on impiously, "I'd sooner sail with Tros, vomit or not, than be blessed by all the druids between here and Mona." *

"Don't blaspheme the druids," Tros retorted. "As for me, I would rather have their blessing than all Cæsar's gold."

"Well, you have both, you have both!" said Orwic pleasantly. "The druids like you, and the gold rings genuine. What have you to worry about?"

"This," Tros answered: "that a number of you young horse-performers"—Caswallon and Orwic laughed delightedly at that—"must be on that galley and obedient to me. That is worry enough. Everything aboard a ship is just so, with one man giving orders and the rest obeying, or the ship sinks."

"What of it?" Orwic asked.

Caswallon held a finger up again for silence. Fflur's eyes were looking dreamy. A great gust of wind blew down the chimney, sending a cloud of smoke into the room. The wind howled, and a log fell suddenly sending up an explosion of sparks. Fflur's voice,

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* Anglesea, a very sacred place.

when she spoke at last, was far-away and colorless, pitched in a middle monotone.

"Whatever you do, or whatever you do not, Cæsar will come again, but not yet. He will cross the Thames; but I see Lunden standing after Cæsar has gone, taking many with him—prisoners, hostages, slaves, women.

"Do what you will, you can not prevent Cæsar from coming. Do what he will, he can not win Britain, although Gaul is his, and so are the lands of the Belgæ. Tros shall injure him, but not much, and again a little, and that time more severely, only to befriend him in the end.

"Tros shall do Cæsar a service that neither he nor Cæsar will value at the moment; but it will place the world at Cæsar's feet, and kill him before he can grasp it. Tros and a woman, whom he shall serve to her own undoing."

She ceased, coughing in the sharp smoke, and Caswallon sent a serf outside to climb on the roof and fix a slab of wood against the chimney top. When that was done, he drank heavily of mead with apples in it, and, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, pronounced judgment.

"I never knew Fflur wrong when she is in that mood. So I think it is a good thing to launch this venture against Cæsar, because Tros, she says, shall injure him. What of the Phœnician? Is he willing?"

Tros admitted with a gruff laugh that the Phœnician had not yet given his consent.

"But I have gone the right way to persuade him. I have promised him my help to get past the Romans on his way home, whether he helps me or not. He will do more in that way, than if I bargained with him."

At which Caswallon roared with laughter.

"Try that trick on the Iceni!" he shouted. "Eh, Orwic? Let him try to buy a horse or two on such terms. Lud! Oh, Lud of Lunden Town! Hey there! Send for the Phœnician."

He threw a lump of wood at one of the sleepers on the benches and sent him to bring Hiram-bin-Ahab "shawls and all."

"Bring him in a basket if he won't walk."

Tros urged that the Phœnician was a brave old sailor who should be treated with the courtesy due to a blood relation. But that was because he and Hiram-bin-Ahab were members of the same secret fraternity, although of different chapters of it.

"I know these blood relations," said Caswallon. "Aye, he is a very bloody one. Eh, Fflur? Eh, Orwic? He underpaid us for the tin and overcharged us for the dyes. He has lived at our expense, and his crew have robbed our townsmen, mending boats that the lazy rascals should have mended for themselves, demanding twice what the work is worth, and saving money for their master, who pays them nothing while they are in port. Drunken, knife-throwing thieves! What's worse, there will be a lot of little half-Phœnician bastards for us to try and make good Britons of!"

However, he was courteous when the old Phœnician came, coughing and shivering in his camel-hair shawls. He had a great chair set for him before the fire and woke up the dogs to make room for him, offering him warm mead, saying that Fflur knew how to cure all kinds of coughs.

"Only she will purge you worse than druids do," he added reminiscently. "The last time she cured me of a headache I had belly burning for a week."

"She's better than the druids, though," said Orwic. "Druids put you on rations of dry bread and carrots, and make you drink water like a horse. When you're properly famished they preach about your latter end and being born again into another body, until you feel like burning all the undesirables, so that it won't be into one of their bodies anyhow. I'd rather be purged by Fflur than preached at by a druid."

"None can cure me," Hiram-bin-Ahab answered, coughing. "This is my last journey."

"Hah!" remarked Caswallon. "Then make it one to be remembered. On a man's last journey he should play a man's part."

The old Phœnician glanced from face to face, his fingers twitching nervously.

"You will reach home," Fflur assured him.

Hiram-bin-Ahab coughed, perhaps to hide a grin, or so at least thought Tros.

"If I knew surely I would reach home, I would put into no port on the way," he answered.

"Fflur is always right," Caswallon retorted, almost angrily. "So it is certain you will reach home. Therefore you can afford to do your friends a service on the way."

"I have done you many services," said the Phœnician. "I taught your women how to use the dye so that it would not wash out. I taught your sailors how to make boats water-tight; how to make a proper rope by twisting seven sets of linen strands; how to bind the edges of a sail, and how to cut the sail so that it will catch more wind. What more do you want of me?"

"No more than you shall do," Caswallon answered, laying a great blue-and-white fist on his knee and leaning forward. "You wish to go before the winter storms. But unless you will do what I propose, you shall not sail until spring comes."

The Phœnician coughed, perhaps to hide embarrassment, but it racked his frame for all that.

"What could you profit by keeping me here all winter?" he asked.

"I am thinking of you," Caswallon answered. "If you will do what I wish, I will send an escort with you, a great bireme, as far as the end of the coast of Gaul to protect you against Romans and Northmen and pirates. But if not, then I could not spare the escort. And I should be a mean host to let you go away alone before the spring in that case. There might be fewer pirates in the spring, and fewer storms and possibly no Romans. Name a price if you will; but you shall do what I demand."

"There is nothing I could ask," said the Phœnician, "except, perhaps, a pair of pretty slave girls for the court of Ptolemy."

But he knew Caswallon would not grant that favor, because he had tried before and Fflur had vetoed it.

"I have sold you three rowers," said Caswallon. "I will give you back the price of them, if that will satisfy you."

Hiram-bin-Ahab coughed again and spat into the fire. The expression of his face might have been due to physical agony, but Tros thought not.

"I am a trader," he said at last, and his words were arresting because he spoke slowly in a foreign accent, with harsh gutturals and none of the soft, swift, liquid sounds the Britons used.

"I fill a ship. I buy men or I hire them, and I drive them to the world's end. Some die; some live; all suffer. I trade and I fill my ship again and go home, I suffering more than any, because it is my ship, my risk. You understand me?

"Sickness, mutiny, Romans, pirates, rocks, tides, quicksands, storms, all these and more I struggle with, day and night, month after month. Ever I swear each journey is the last. Ever I set forth again, because two spirits in me urge. One beckons and the other drives.

"Trade I must, because I am a trader and I itch for trade. Adventure I must have, because I am an adventurer; it is in my blood, my bones, my dreams. It frets me when I count the profits of a journey and men say to me, 'Hiram-bin-Ahab, you are rich at last. Go not again. Remember the pot that went too often to the well.'

"And yet I go again, because I love adventure and I love trade, being wedded to them as to two wives, each of whom is jealous of the other and I striving to serve both equally, giving each her turn, yet living, as it were, in one house with the two."

The howling wind blew away the board from the chimney top, sending it clattering along the roof. A great cloud of smoke filled the room and the old Phœnician coughed until it seemed as if his lungs would burst under the strain.

Caswallon scolded the serf and sent him to fix the board in place again, threatening to make him stand and hold it there all night unless he should fasten it properly. Then when the smoke had thinned a little and they had thrown fresh oak knots on the fire, Hiram-bin-Ahab cleared his throat with warm mead and, biting an apple, went on talking:

"Trade and adventure, two jealous wives, helping, hindering each other. *Hey-hey!* I have been a good husband to both of them—*keh-keh-keh*—and I am old. A too good husband ages sooner than a bad one.

"Trade and adventure—the same and not the same. For when I trade"—he thrust his hands forward, palms upward, and moved the fingers in a "hither! come ye hither!" gesture—"I look to profit. That wife is a thrifty one, you understand me? Eh? *Keh-keh-keh-ka-a-gh*—these fogs! These fogs!

"And when I go adventuring—*eh-h-h,* but I have seen strange sights in my day: mountains of ice in the sea, and whales around them, and the big fish warring with the whales until the sea was blood-red; land where you could see the sun at midnight, where fir trees taller than British elms came to the sea's edge and the men wore bearskin and ate fish; black stone that burns—"

"We have that," said Caswallon. "Our fishermen bring it from the country north of the Iceni. We have burned it on this hearth."

"Have you seen fish fly?" asked the Phœnician.

"No," said Caswallon, "but I have listened to a lot of lies in my day."

"Oh, well. When I go adventuring, it is for love of the adventure. That wife is a mistress, teases, coaxes, is extravagant"—he threw his hands outward, and smiled as if he were pouring a fortune into a woman's lap, a lovely, lucky woman to be wooed by that tough old master of experience—"but I never forget that I have *two* wives.

"I have carried the stone that burns, all the way from an island where it snows at midsummer and the sun shines at midnight [*] to Alexandria, where I sold it to King Ptolemy the Piper [†] for its weight in corn, which I took to Ostia in four ships and sold to the Romans for silver. *Hey-yey!*

"And Ptolemy burned the black stone all in one night, when he was drunk, to entertain a Roman money-lender; made a circle of it in the execution place and burned I don't know how many convicted criminals, throwing in more and more until the fire was finished. But he would have killed them anyhow, so that is not on my head. Let Ptolemy answer for that.

"Of all the men who set sail with me on my first voyage—I was younger than Tros then; that is fifty years ago—not one man lives but I. Storms, sickness, strife: I have enough to answer for."

"You haven't answered me," said Caswallon firmly. "Tros spoke to you of what I require. Will you do it, or no?"

Hiram-bin-Ahab took a drink of mead. Then he looked at Fflur a long time. Then he met Caswallon's eyes.

"If it is for Tros and his father Perseus, I will do it gladly and for nothing," he said, drawing up his legs and folding them under him, as if he were sitting on his own poop. "But if it is for you, you pay."

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[*] Spitzbergen?

[†] Father of Cleopatra.

Fflur nodded. She understood him perfectly, but Caswallon looked piqued and Orwic swore under his breath.

"Have I not been your good host?" Caswallon asked.

"Aye, and I have been your good guest. As to that there is no account awaiting settlement. But Tros, who might have made a bargain, and a hard one—for I will need that permit he can sign with Cæsar's seal—Tros chose to make none, but promised, as a young man to an old one—"

Caswallon stood up suddenly. He was a giant, and he looked like the god of battles when he tossed his head to throw back the long, fair hair.

"By the Blood of Lud!" he thundered, "I am not behind Tros in this my kingdom! Take what you will! Help yourself to anything your old eyes covet, and go free. For I think as you say, this is to be your last journey. I ask nothing of you."

"Then I must do the best I can," said the Phœnician, sipping at the mead again and glancing at Tros slyly. *"Hey-yey!* When a man has two wives, it is not always the thrifty one whose counsel guides him."

Later, when the men-at-arms were very fast asleep, Caswallon went and fetched a druid, who had lived in Gaul and learned great skill with the pen. Then they brought out Cæsar's chest, and after much confabulation between Tros and Hiram-bin-Ahab the druid copied Roman documents on parchment, making changes at Tros' dictation, and forging Cæsar's signature so perfectly that not even Fflur's keen eyes could tell the difference when she compared copy and original.

At last, with a great laugh of contentment, Tros affixed Cæsar's seal, and went out with his arm around the shivering Phœnician, to greet the golden dawn.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH THE WOMEN LEND A HAND

Ye think obedience is indignity; and so it is, if ye obey your baser selves, or if ye serve another's avarice. But will ye all be kings and captains? It is neither freedom nor love of freedom that makes you disobedient, but envy, and fear lest a leader should prove what muddleheads ye are.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE Britons called it fun, until the third, or maybe the fourth day, when even Orwic tired of it. The women had enough to do to copy Roman costumes, and all the blacksmiths on the countryside were set to making Roman shields and swords in imitation of those captured on the Kentish beach.

The helmets were the greatest difficulty, until they found a way of imitating them with basketwork, at which Britons were experts. They stretched skin over that and painted it, making plumes of horse-hair.

Conops had a hard time keeping the Britons from making their own improvements. They wanted to make the plumes three times the size and to lengthen the swords, and to paint the shields blue because that was the color that always brought them luck.

Tros saw to the galley, which needed such an overhaul as was next to impossible to make in haste in that undisciplined community. They had a Celtic kind of individuality, that fused them into one mercurial mass in opposition to authority, but made them units in deciding what to do and when to do it.

When all other excuses for not working had been tried, they discovered that the day was sacred to some god or other and decamped to the woods to listen to a sermon from the druids.

So the druids had to be won over, and Tros did that by letting them into the secret that he hoped to capture Cæsar, enemy of their religion. Their forest dwellings were a-hum with fugitives from Gaul, who had brought details of the tortures Cæsar used in his efforts to learn druidic secrets.

So the druids came down in procession from forest to waterside and blessed the bireme, with dew and earth and mistletoe, proclaiming the ship sacred and whoever should lend a hand to recondition her, or whoever should sail in her under Tros's command, thrice blessed.

"You'll find we'll have to fight for what we want though," Orwic commented.

The galley had been built in Gaul, from a Roman model but by unaccustomed shipwrights, and in haste, because Cæsar did everything in half the time that other people liked to squander. So, to a practised eye, she would have been an obvious fraud if she had appeared off Caritia pretending to have come from a Roman port through the Gates of Hercules.

She was too small, too clumsily built, and undersparred. It called for a very great deal of crafty reconstruction to make up for the lack of size, and, even so, pitch and linen-covered wickerwork had to masquerade in many instances as heavy timber, not that timber was lacking, but time. And the Britons were nimble with their favorite withes.

Tros built a whole new bow and stern of wickerwork on light oak frames, and covered that with painted cloth to make the ship look larger, praying to all the gods he had ever heard of, and they were many, not to send even such a half-gale as should break it all away.

In all that, he was ably helped by Hiram-bin-Ahab, who had sent his own tight ship downriver, with Skell on board, to lie up in a creek and wait for him. Thus they lost the services of the Phœnician's crew, but prevented Skell from seeing the galley or learning of what was taking place.

They mended the great arrow-engines and crammed the baskets full of new-made arrows nearly a yard long, Tros stowing those below deck to keep the Britons from firing them at marks across the river—they claiming they must have practice; he swearing he would have ammunition. They filled the water casks. That was a prodigious business, because the Britons swore that any sort of water was a miserable substitute for mead; but Tros made them clean the casks with charcoal and then haul water from a dozen miles away, having seen too many crews die of the stuff they put into ships from longshore wells. And by that time the Britons voted him a despot, although, and perhaps because, he had only used up ten days for the entire business.

But it was not until the ship was ready and the crew had to be broken in that his real trouble began.

Fflur, Caswallon and Orwic had chosen a hundred of the brassiest young coxcombs Britain could produce. Most of them had ridden into the waves in the teeth of Cæsar's legions and had slain their Romans, hand-to-hand, but were chosen chiefly for their horsemanship. That was not so foolish as at first appeared, because the men with the highest courage and the strongest sense of manhood took the trouble to excel at that. But they were coxcombs.

Orwic himself would have challenged Tros a hundred times if the other ninety-nine had not been so continually challenging him that he had to stand by the commander to uphold his own lieutenancy.

Their theory was that they should stand around the deck in imitation Roman armor and look handsome until they came in sight of Gaul, when they would land by some unexplained stratagem by night and rape the lair of Cæsar.

The twenty paid seamen who had brought the galley up the Thames with Tros, and perhaps a few more pressed for the occasion, were to do the work; and they were perfectly willing to help Tros lick those seamen into absolute obedience.

Tros stood on the poop with arms akimbo and laughed gaily at them, because if he had shown his real feelings there would have been no chance that he could handle them at all.

"Why not have *me* do all the work, and you all be the captains?" he suggested amiably.

He bulked big in a Roman's armor that the blacksmiths had enlarged to fit him, and he wore his own long sword as well as a short Roman one, which made him look dangerous. An imitation Roman helmet—none of the captured ones was big enough—cocked at a bit of an angle suggested an indifference to consequences. The toga thrown back over his shoulder gave him dignity.

And there were always those leonine eyes, that a man could not see without knowing there was a volcano not exactly slumbering behind them, but under control until needed.

"You!"

He singled out the most opinionated of them all, a youth of twenty, whose wife had painted new blue pictures on his white skin, and whose moustache was like a fox's, about ten reddish hairs on either side.

"Come up here on the poop and show me how to set that sail! Stand by, the rest of you, to take his orders!"

The coxcomb had the good sense to refuse, but that did not save him from being laughed at, and when the laugh had died and they had all done imitating what they thought were deep-sea orders—such as they had heard along the riverbank when the fisher-crews put out for herring in the North Sea—Tros dealt out information. He was growing very fluent in the Gaulish dialect they used.

"Ye know the feel of a horse's backbone, when ye ride ten leagues without a saddle. Ye know soreness of the hams and how the spine can tremble like a stick with a weight of pain atop. Those are beginnings. I deal now in middle matters. And the end is not yet.

"Ye shall learn now what hard corns feel like on the hams; and how red hot the blisters grow on hands that have pulled on an oar a day or two. Ache? Ye have never ached as ye shall before this journey ends.

"Ye need now spines like oak trees, sinews like new ropes, belly muscles like a bear's. Ye need guts such as go into a wild boar's constitution, and a lot more courage than ye showed there on the beach when ye stood off Cæsar's men!

"I saw that fight. I watched it from this poop. I saw each turn of it, and perceived how Cæsar won. That day, ye fought by fits and starts. Ye charged into the sea, and out again to let the rear ranks have a turn, resting yourselves behind the fighting line, to come at it again; whereas Cæsar's men stuck to it until they won the beach.

"And now ye are trigged like Romans, ye must do as Romans! There is no pausing between encounters with the wind and sea. The tides don't cease because your hams smart with the salt in open blisters. Ye may cry, but the storm shrieks louder, and the only answer to the storm is work.

"Ye can get off your horses and walk home if your buttocks are on fire and your shoulders feel like a sack of wheat on a knitting needle. Not so at sea! Ye must sit and row until the oar-handle bucks back and lifts you by the chin, and the oar-end of the man behind you takes you in the shoulder-blades.

"With the ship rolling and the wind howling and the water squirting through the oar-port, ye must keep on rowing, while the blisters burn and your bones ache as if chariots had driven over them. This sea game is a calling that needs guts.

"So I will think no worse of any man who cries off now. I will cry good bed to him and good mead and a fireside. I need the daring men on this adventure, the bold spirits who would rather die than quit, the men who can endure pain and the cold and vomiting, and still row until I bid them cease. Ashore then now, every man who thinks himself unfit for this adventure!"

They howled at him to show them something he could do and they could not, mocking the sea and all its tantrums, as any young cockerel can who hasn't tried it and who has a quart or two of *curmi* or some other potent liquor under his sword-belt. So he changed his strategy then and promised, by the great North Light that never failed a mariner, that he would leave behind whoever should disobey one order or shirk one trick of training before the start.

"Ye have stood up to the big bear and the lean wolf and the gray boar. But I will make you fit to face the sea! May the gods, who laugh, forgive me!" he added in an undertone to the old Phoenician. "Can a man turn Britons into mariners?"

Caswallon kept away.

"They will appeal to me and I might have to side with them," he said when Tros invited him to come and watch proceedings.

But he took care to learn how Tros had handled them and laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks.

For one of the things that Tros did was to moor the galley by the stern to the oak pile in mid-river, and to set those free and fearless horsemen rowing against that, with the paid seamen placed at intervals along the benches to set the pace and show them an example. And that, as Orwic swore, was no amusement for a British gentleman.

For a while they made sport of it, trying to break the warp or else the oaken pile, but all they succeeded in doing was to stir up Thames mud until the stink offended them, and to crack one another in the back with oar-ends until hot words led to fighting, and Tros had to get down among them with a mop to swab their indignant faces and get them all laughing again.

Conops' services were lost then, when most needed. He was used to teaching men to row. He could have run along the plank beside the benches, singling out this man and that, showing exactly how to hold an oar and how to throw the head back when the blade struck water.

But word came up-river, brought by Hiram-bin-Ahab's second mate in a small boat, that Skell was growing restless and threatening to leave the Phœnician's ship unless something happened before nightfall. So Conops had to be sent back with him to manage Skell. Tros's parting words were careful.

"Understand me—he mustn't be tied. He mustn't think he is a prisoner, or he may see through the whole trick. Also, I want him alive and fit for treachery in Gaul. So, first, try lying to him. Say Hiram-bin-Ahab will come to-morrow, then the next day, and so on. When that fails, pick a quarrel with him.

"He will call you a liar, no doubt. Be offended by that and lay him out with a belaying pin or with your knife-hilt. But mind, no overdoing it. A sore head may stir the venom in him, which I need. But a knife wound might let the impudence out, and he will need all his impudence this journey."

Conops winked his only eye, bowed with a movement like a curtsey until his weather-stained blue kirtle nearly touched the deck, holding his right hand up, palm outward, and departed overside. He would have gone to Gaul, to try and kidnap Cæsar single-handed, if Tros had ordered it.

Thereafter, Tros was in a quandary, because the girls came down to the riverbank and crowded into boats, to laugh at the oarsmen's antics and at the oar blades spraddling this and that way like the legs of a drunken centipede.

They screamed idiotically when the galley lurched toward them, and asked, when it lurched away again, whether Tros had his crew chained by the foot, the way the Northmen chained slaves to the benches.

When Orwic leaned over the side to order them away in his haughtiest manner, they called him "sailor-man Orwic" and asked how much a basket were the fish.

So the first day's practice at the oars broke up in rowdy repartee and ended by the girls all being chased home, screaming, Orwic vowing that women were the curse of the human race.

"That's one thing I concede the druids," he said scornfully. "They are born of women, like the rest of us, but they know enough to keep away from them when they once take vows. What puzzles me is, why a man can't do that without pulling a long face and singing hymns at sunrise. I was through with women long ago. They spoil everything."

But Tros went straight to a woman, Fflur, by her fireside, where she knitted the first trousers of her youngest son and listened to the calf-love story of her eldest, who had seen a girl who suited him "by Verulam, where Merlin son of Merlin keeps the mill. Aye, Mother, Merlin's daughter."

When she had said her say concerning Merlin's daughter—and there was much she said that was pointed, but without a barb, and much more that was understood she might have said, had it not been better that Caswallon should say that for her—she listened to Tros, seeming to listen with those gray eyes rather than with her ears, which were hidden under the gray-shot golden hair.

And that night Fflur gave a party to the women, at which no men were present, although the men made bonfires all around the house and caterwauled and burned a witch in effigy, pretending they thought the women were conspiring to sell Lunden to the Romans and submit themselves to Roman husbands. They even made a Roman out of a pig's bladder and some meal bags, and pushed it through the window on a stick.

But what happened at that party did not leak out, because Fflur knew how secrets are told in such a way that women keep them. The girls had a great air of importance when they let the men lead them home at last, but no amount of cajoling or teasing made them talk.

And next day, when most of his hundred—as Tros had expected they would—refused downrightly to return to rowing and be made ridiculous, the girls joined hands and danced around them, mocking them, singing a new song Fflur had set to an old tune. It was about the men of Lunden, who were such babies that they could only ride horseback and were afraid to hurt their lily-white hands by pulling at ash oars.

So the hundred went back to the rowing, because the girls declared they wouldn't kiss a man who hadn't blisters on his hands and couldn't make an ash oar keep time as it smote the water. In fact, there were more than a hundred who offered themselves in place of the mutineers, and several heads were broken as the original hundred defended their claim to be the first gentlemen rowers in all Britain, a kind of brand-new aristocracy with first claim on the admiration of the women.

Orwic had two girls in attendance on him when he sauntered back to duty. He contrived to look bored, but the appearance was unconvincing.

CHAPTER XXII

MUTINY AND MAL DE MER

> Ye speak to me with deference, and in my presence ye behave with reverence for the Wisdom that I worship. But why do ye not slay me? I will tell you. Ye fear those underlings, for whom I insist on such small justice as your law permits. And they fear you. But I fear neither them, nor you, nor death.
>
> FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THEN came, after a series of gales, one of those clear October nights when Britain is hushed, as if she heard the winter coming and were waiting in her bridal robes. The very animals were still. The river sucked by the wharf-piles with a hint of bell notes in the splash, and the stars shone as if wet with dew.

That was the night Tros started. He had sent Hiram-bin-Ahab downriver in the afternoon, the rowboat keeping close inshore to avoid the incoming tide. There were no farewell feasts or mead drinkings, because the old man protested he could not sit through another such ordeal.

Caswallon permitted him to vanish like a specter of the past, wrapped in his camel-hair shawls and seated in the stern of Fflur's swan-carved barge.

But twenty of the young girls kissed him first, lest Britain be disgraced, and hung three garlands around his neck, filling the boat so full of flowers that the rowers had hard work to take their seats.

And Tros would have no feasting because he wanted his crew sober. If they had sat down in Caswallon's hall to meat and mead there would have been no hope of getting them on board before morning.

But he could not keep Fflur and Caswallon off the ship, and although Caswallon, at Tros's request, gave out that the galley would leave on the following day, all Lunden was there, nevertheless, two hours after sunset, when the tide changed, and the girls so flocked around the ship in punts and rowboats that when Tros ordered the warp cast off and struck the first beat on the bull-hide drum to time the oarsmen, there were upsets, screams, girls in the river, and it needed Tros's voice, roaring louder than the drum, to keep the oars at work.

Even so, as the tide took hold of the galley, she almost buried her beak in the mud below the pool.

But Caswallon had brought along three druids to forfend ill luck. There was mistletoe at the masthead. The moon was just exactly right, a crescent with the points so oriented as to gather fortune from the sky and pour it on the undertaking.

So nobody was drowned, as Orwic, leaning out from the fighting top at the masthead, where he was supposed to be conning the course, reported.

Orwic said he knew those reaches of the Thames. So Tros had sent him up there, chiefly to flatter him, but he sent a seaman up there too, and Caswallon made Orwic his admiral afterwards, he was so impressed by the way the ship was piloted in darkness.

They rowed downstream to drumbeat, towing Caswallon's barge, filling the night with throbbing until the ducks awoke and scuttered into deeper reed beds, until the singing of the girls by Lunden Pool grew faint and died away in a murmur, until mud appeared, as the tide receded, and Tros held the galley in mid-river, not trusting even Orwic's skilled assistant to know short cuts in the gloom.

And at last they saw a dim light in the marshes, which was Hiram-bin-Ahab's riding light, and there Fflur, Caswallon and the druids were put overside to wait for the tide to change again and bear them back, upstream, to Lunden Town.

But first Caswallon made a speech to the gentlemen adventurers who leaned on the white-ash oars to listen, each man with an immitation Roman helmet, sword and armor under his rowing bench.

"Sons of good British mothers! Let none return to Britain less a man than he set forth! Into Tros's hands I have given you, charging him that he shall lead you nobly. Do ye obey him. Trust him. I hold him answerable. If he brings you back with honor, I will honor him; and I think he will lead you craftily to great deeds, the which I would that I might share in.

"But I am the king, whose foot should not leave Britain, save in extremity. Smite, each of you, a blow for me! For lo! I am a king who strikes at Cæsar with a hundred sword hands, with the cunning of a hundred brains. So be ye valiant!"

They did not cheer, lest Skell should hear them on the old Phœnician's ship. Caswallon, Fflur and the druids went overside into the lapping darkness and were rowed into the reeds to await the coming tide.

Then Tros called to Orwic to light a masthead flare, and when that had burned for the space of a hundred heart-beats the pitch-dipped branch was cast into the river like a plunging meteor and Tros set the drumbeat going, low, slow, regular, muting the drum with his knee, lest Skell should catch the rhythm and add two and two together later on.

Then, when they had cleared the mouth of Medway and at dawn the river broadened out of view on either hand, he set the drum to thundering and made the oarsmen grunt and sweat until they felt the long swell under them and, as the tide was near the slack, an off-shore breeze awoke.

"This Lud of Lunden is a god with brains," Tros shouted then. "Tide he gives us, and then a wind exactly in the quarter whence we need it!"

He laughed when the hirelings manned the halyards and the wind filled the bellying sail, for he had those young cockerels at his mercy now. Soon he could hear Orwic's groan and vomit from the fighting top, for the tide had turned against the wind.

There was a lively motion in the dark, uplifting rollers and a drift of white scud splashing through the oar-ports. Now was not much need to bid the rowing cease; good half the oars were idle before the order came.

And as Tros leaned on the helm to make the utmost of the wind to gain an offing before he should turn, with tide abeam, southward along the coast of Kent, he chuckled—first at the silence in the ship's waist, then at the noise of resurrected mead and venison that gurgled overside or in between the benches, anywhere at all!

The twenty sea-wise hirelings, who had fought him all the way from Gaul to Lunden not so long ago, gave him no trouble at all on this adventure, since he had them too, at disadvantage.

As surely as they were none too many to man the sheets and braces, they were all too few to offer disobedience, with a hundred of Caswallon's blooded cockerels, seasick though those were, at hand to put them in their place. The scorn was mutual and thorough.

The more sick the aristocracy became, the less they admired such human cattle as could thrive in a box on a heaving sea and, by the same compelling instinct, the less pleased it made them to be patronized.

One seaman, who dared to grin between decks when sent below to wedge a shifting water cask in place, was almost killed, which set Tros thinking.

He put a seaman at the helm and went below, discovering more than twenty oarsmen who were only sick enough to fell ill-tempered, chilly and ashamed. He gathered them in the ship's waist, abaft the citadel.

"Choose," he ordered gruffly. "Take mops and clean up all that mess of vomiting, or stand a watch on deck and let the seamen swab."

They chose the deck, and Tros, in no hurry at all, since he must let the Phœnician overtake him after the next tide, spilled the wind out of the sail repeatedly until they learned the use of brace and sheet. There being no such cure for seasickness as work aboard a plunging ship, he quartered the sea in every possible direction to keep them busy at the ropes and to accustom them to every kind of belly-empty motion, until they grew new sea legs under them and were aware of appetite.

When they had eaten of the sacked dry venison and bread, such sleepiness came over them as only sea produces, sleepiness of bone and brain and muscle, eyes, skin, all the senses, until an oak deck felt like a feather bed and any kind of wind-break was a haven of dreamless bliss.

So he let them sleep wherever they lay down to it, and the seamen stood watch and watch that night, but later, when the storm came, Tros had a score of proud men he could call on, half of them in either watch, not expert, but enthusiastic. Thus he was able to rest ten tired-out real seamen at a time.

And that worked wonders. For the aristocracy discovered they were not so far behind the seamen after all, stronger than they when their muscle counted, lacking only knowledge of what to do, and how to do it with the least exertion.

That led to rivalry, even to blows, until Orwic, green-cheeked, swaying and self-conscious, crawled down from the fighting top at last, compelled himself to eat, and took charge of his friends.

Then Tros rearranged the watches, keeping gentlemen and seamen to themselves, and matched one against the other. By the afternoon of the first day out the men who had lain groaning in the scuppers began appearing one by one on deck, and some of them added themselves to Orwic's watch, getting in one another's way, but learning rapidly.

So all went increasingly well until Tros hove the ship to in fine weather, the second day out from Lunden, with the Kentish cliffs in sight on one hand and the cliffs of Gaul just visible through a haze to southward.

Being hove to was another kind of motion. There were prompt defections from the ranks of Orwic's men. But Tros was more concerned about the blue haze masking the cliffs of Gaul and a change of weather in the northwest where a bank of gray cold-looking clouds looked full of wind.

Watching that cloudbank and the line of white across the sea beneath it, his eye detected two specks that he liked still less, for they followed a third, which was certainly the three-reefed mainsail of Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship. He knew that Phœnician curved spar as he knew the cliffs of Samothrace, and, though he had only seen the spar and lug-sail of a Northman once, he did not need Orwic's voice from the fighting top to warn him that Hiram-bin-Ahab was running from a pair of North Sea pirates.

The Britons began roaring for a battle on the deep, and even the seasick oarsmen crawled on deck, recovering their strength from sheer excitement, some of them demanding food, that they might gain strength for the fighting. But Tros stood scratching at his beard, perplexed.

The gods—and he was a whole-souled pantheist, who saw the hand of one god or another in every splash of spray and change of circumstances—were staging a conundrum for him that demanded wit.

He felt reasonably sure he could beat those Northmen off, for he knew his Britons and the dreadful havoc he could wreak with six great arrow-engines. Too, if he could trust his oarsmen, by a deft maneuver he might wreck one Northman, catching her in a following sea—it was boiling white now under the racing clouds, and the following sea would swamp her as her slim bows crumpled on the galley's oak-and-iron ram. That would leave but one Northman to deal with, and six arrow-engines for the work: one slim-waisted longship, that had run too long before the rising sea to dare to turn about.

He smiled at the nerve of the old Phœnician, who had dared to reef down snugly even though the Northmen gained on him and he had no fighting crew. He supposed old Hiram-bin-Ahab had counted on the sight of a Roman bireme to send the pirates scurrying for shelter, calculating speed and distance with the accuracy that a man learns in fifty years at sea.

But what if the Northmen did not know the bireme's possibilities? Had Rome ever sent a ship up their way? They might mistake her for some freakish foreign thing hove to and helpless, as she surely would be presently, unless he should go about in time. The storm would burst on him as the galley lay a-rolling with her yard braced nearly fore and aft.

Tros felt at the helm, watching all three ships, and there was hardly a mile between them, or more than three miles between them and himself. The Northmen seemed not far behind the old Phœnician in seamanship.

If he should fail to put the galley about before the thundering northwester hurled high seas on him—and it would be too late then—they would simply storm along past him and pursue the old Phœnician until they could close with him at their own discretion, perhaps in the lee of Vectis or wherever the wind and sea should offer opportunity.

But if he should go about in time, ahead of that tumbling sea, and run, he was afraid the Northmen might think he ran from them, and that involved a second problem: that his own Britons might believe the same thing and be mutinous.

Then, though he had improved her, the galley still steered like a house when a following sea lumped under her high stern. There was the risk, amounting almost to a certainty, that a high sea under that stern would break away the wicker false end he had erected at such pains to increase the ship's apparent size.

However, he went about, and squared away under a three-reefed mainsail before the storm struck him, boiling along beam to beam with Hiram-bin-Ahab three-quarters of a mile to starboard and one of the Northmen half a mile astern. The other lurched and pitched off the Phœnician's quarter like a lean wolf keeping a stag in view.

Then Tros began to curse the day when Romans ever left dry land and built themselves floating islands that they fondly thought were ships. Hiram-bin-Ahab's sweet-lined little merchant-ship, with her great eye painted in the bow, deep-laden though she was, sailed faster than he could follow without spreading more sail than he dared.

The Northmen raced along like hungry fish, their beautifully molded bows preventing them from plunging. It was going to be a hopeless stern chase, with all the ever-widening channel in which to scatter, and small hope of coming to the Phœnician's aid in time.

Tros made up his mind swiftly when he realized that, for the waves were thundering under his stern and loosening the wicker dummy work with every plunge. Already the cloth covering was washed away and there was nothing to be gained by maneuvering to save what seemed already doomed.

He changed his helm and ordered two reefs shaken out, turning the reeling galley's broadside almost square to the waves, and bore down on the nearest Northman.

It was then that he cursed himself for letting Conops go to the Phœnician. There was no one he could trust to rush below and make sure of the closing of the oar-ports; no one to stand below the poop and enforce his orders on the instant that he roared them; no one to see that the arrow baskets did not lurch overside while the

Britons wrestled with one another for the right to serve the engines; no one to see that the gut was sheltered from the spray.

Some fool loosed the dolphin from its lashings and the great iron horror began swinging from the yardarm like Fate's pendulum, threatening to chafe its halyard and go crashing through the deck, striking the shrouds when the ship lurched, swinging the yard and spilling wind out of the sail.

Nor had he a seaman fit to send aloft to throw a rope around the thing and make it fast. He *had* to let the helm go then. He gave it to Orwic, jumped to the main deck and up on to the citadel. Thence he sprang into the shrouds with drawn sword, slashing at the halyard as it swung, and the dolphin grazed the ship's side as it plunged through the crest of a wave, forever harmless.

Orwic, laughing happily when Tros took the helm again, cuffed another Briton away from one of the poop arrow-engines. He had feared he might miss something by having to stand there hauling at a steering oar, and in another minute he would have let the helm go anyhow.

The heads of the Northmen showed plainly now between the shields erected all along the longship's bulwark. Orwic began laying arrows in the grooves, while half a dozen young enthusiasts got in one another's way to turn the crank and strain the bows taut.

But it was the bow engines that fired first, ignoring the galley's roll and shoulder plunge, that were increased by the weight of the fighting top, where no man could have clung and kept his senses.

One volley of arrows plunked into the sea like a flight of hurrying fish, three waves away. The other went rocketing so high over the Northmen's mast that the pirates did not even guess of its existence.

What the Northmen did see was a row of tousled heads along the galley's bulwark, and a galley plunging down on them under a weight of sail that looked like carrying the mast away and bore her down until the keel showed in the trough between two waves.

They could see the boiling ram, and they were smart of helm enough to miss that easily. But they could not see much, in the way of men or weapons, that alarmed them, until Orwic, steadying himself with a foot against the poop rail, loosed his trial shot exactly at the moment when the galley's stern paused swaying on a wave. It was the sway that did the spreading. It was luck, or Lud of Lunden, maybe, that sent twelve arrows screaming straight into the gaps between the Northmen's shields.

The Northmen did not wait for any more of that.

Their helm went over instantly. A big man, whose long, fair hair streamed out from under a peaked helmet, shook his fist as the crew hauled on the braces and the longship changed her course toward the coast of Britain.

Tros's cockerels sent flight after flight of arrows after her, and one chance volley of a dozen plunked through the crimson sail, but most of them went wide by half a dozen ship's lengths, and there was no hope of pursuit.

But the other Northman, who had been edging his way gradually closer to Hiram-bin-Ahab's flank, turned tail too, because Northmen were easily scared when they did not understand just what was happening, and both longships shook down a reef in a hurry to reach shelter under the cliffs of Kent. So Tros, too, changed his helm, to follow the Phœnician, hoping the Northmen would suppose he had chased them from their quarry in order to capture it himself.

But the instant he changed his course he had to deal with mutiny. The Britons, Orwic leading, swore they would not sail another yard with him unless he should follow the Northmen and force them to give battle.

They called him coward, traitor, a purse-loving Samothracian. They struck the helm away from him and tried to sail the galley for themselves, laying her over until even Tros cried out in terror and half of the water casks broke adrift below, thundering and crashing as if the ship were falling apart.

But the sail did not split, because Tros had jumped to the deck and let the sheets go. So when they all discovered they were helpless—and that was only after they had tried to row with heavy water squirting through the oar-ports and a dozen or more knocked senseless as the oar-ends caught them in the jaw—they let Tros take the helm again, threatening to hang him where the dolphin used to swing unless he should pursue the Northmen.

"Then hang me and have done with it!" Tros answered.

He laughed at them. At which they also laughed, because they understood that he had them at his mercy just then. What should happen later was another matter!

The sail thundered and snapped in the wind and none had a notion how to get it sheeted down again, while the galley rolled and every third or fourth wave swept her from stem to stern.

It was more than Tros knew how to do, although he did have twenty men who could go aloft and lay their bellies on the spar, once he could get that braced and steady, but in some way he had to save that sail. So he sent the twenty men aloft to tie a stout line to its corner and then to cut it loose to blow downwind. When it had flopped into the sea he towed it, to help keep his stern to the waves, wondering what Conops might be thinking, for he knew Conops had missed none of that performance. Conops would be watching with one eye as good as half a dozen from the old Phœnician's poop.

The Britons grew seasick again, the excitement having died. There were some who said the expedition was a failure; they demanded that Tros should put back to Lunden as soon as the storm might permit.

"Where the women will laugh at you, and I will bid them laugh, whether you hang me for it or not," Tros answered.

He had only one dread now. The galley would survive the storm, but Hiram-bin-Ahab might run out of his bargain. The Phœnician's ship was out of sight, hidden by spume and rain that made a howling twilight of high noon.

A sudden shift of wind made even the direction doubtful, since without a glimpse of sun or coastline, tide across the current and the wind kicking both into a three-way mess of wallowing confusion, there was nothing to set a course by. At dawn old Hiram-bin-Ahab might be a hundred miles ahead.

Tros laughed at himself bitterly. His whole ingenious plan had gone downwind, and, what was nearly as bad, he had lost his good man Conops. He would not have willingly exchanged him for all the Britons, Orwic included. He knew Conops could take care of himself; but he laughed again, and not so bitterly, to think of Skell's predicament, without friends in some foreign port, and with plenty of press gangs on the prowl for a likely oarsman.

There was no one to consult with. Orwic was indignant because he had refused to chase the Northmen.

"Who will be burning Hythe or Pevensey to-morrow as surely as we've lost the way!" he yelled against the wind when Tros said something flattering about his marksmanship with the arrow-engine.

Nothing after that to do but pace the poop and watch the sea.

Orwic went below. Even the seaman, who relieved Tros at the helm so that he might sleep in snatches, was impudent and made a suggestive motion of finger to throat, prophetic of what might happen when Orwic had done talking to the crew.

However, they were still afloat and likely to survive the storm. The wickerwork structures built at bow and stern were almost undamaged. The pitched cloth covering was gone, but the marvelously twisted basketwork had offered no resistance to the waves, which washed through the interstices, even breaking their force without being torn loose, and keeping many a wave from bursting on the deck.

Tros fell asleep considering that contraption, dreaming of the sweet ship he would some day build—he had her half-designed already in his head—and calculating on a basketwork construction all around her above the waterline, perhaps covered with well-pitched sail-cloth, wondering whether that might not serve better than the metal plates he had always had in mind. He could see the possibilities.

He set himself to try to dream of something better than the sail-cloth for a covering, and dreamed, instead, of deep-sea monsters that came overside and threatened him with death.

When he awoke, both his own long sword and the shorter Roman one were gone. He was not tied, but Orwic and a dozen other Britons were on the poop, eyeing him with guarded curiosity. They were leaning against the poop rail, an obvious committee of mutineers.

It lacked an hour of sundown, and the storm had died, but a tremendous swell was running. The sun was an angry red ball above a welter of gray water, and the coast of Gaul was like a pencil line behind a curtain of haze on the left hand. The twenty seamen were all clustered in the bow, as panicky as sheep that smell wolf.

"We propose to go home," Orwic announced drily, definitely.

"Very well," Tros answered, standing up, arms akimbo, facing them. "Set me ashore on the coast of Gaul."

But Orwic laughed.

"You take us home," he answered.

Tros studied the drift awhile, for there was hardly any wind, although the waves were running too high for that crew of horsemen to manage the oars. It was difficult to judge direction in the gray haze, but at the end of a minute he was nearly sure he could hear surf pounding on a beach.

"Let us see whither we go," he answered, facing them again.

"Home!" repeated Orwic, gesturing rather vaguely to the northward.

But Tros realized that Orwic was ashamed beneath that air of well-bred calm, and that, though he spoke for the committee, he was not its instigator. He had seen a many deep-sea mutinies. He made a gesture to his sword-belt, saying nothing. Orwic actually blushed, which made him look ridiculous, with his hair all blown and tousled and a two days' growth of yellow beard.

"Give me my sword and I will fight the lot of you," said Tros, turning his back again.

He put both hands behind him, listening. He was sure now he could hear surf pounding on a beach, equally sure that it didn't much matter what happened unless he could control the crew. The mutineers consulted in whispers, which is no way to conduct a mutiny. Out of the corner of his eye Tros could see all the rest of the men clustered around the citadel, most of them chin on knee, squatting on the deck, watching the outcome. And that is not the spirit in which mutinies succeed. It was too bad to have to make a fool of Orwic, but even nephews of Caswallons have to learn.

Tros leaned overside and noticed that the basketwork was still in place. He was careful to display his interest in that, watching the suck and movement of it as the galley rolled and the sea swirled in and out through the interstices, as if the mutiny were unimportant.

"We will give you your sword if you will agree to take us home," said Orwic.

"No!" Tros answered, facing them again. "If I have my sword I will be captain, and you will obey me. Without my sword I am not captain."

"Then you must obey us," said Orwic.

"No," Tros answered. "I gave no undertaking to obey you."

"But you shall!" said Orwic.

Tros laughed, for he saw the boy was desperate—between the devil and the deep sea—obliged either to take command of a ship he could not handle or to yield and lose prestige with his own people. There was only one thing that a man of Orwic's breeding could do in that predicament.

"You shall give the undertaking now," he said grimly. But he could not challenge an unarmed man to fight. "Give Tros his sword!" he added, snapping out the four words to a man beside him.

He was pale now, almost gray-white. He could fight on horseback, but he had never tackled a trained swordsman on a swaying deck, and it was growing dark. The sun's red rim was disappearing in a smear of angry haze.

They brought Tros's sword out of the cabin, and Orwic gave it to him, stepping back at once and stripping his own breast bare. For it was against a Briton's code of honor to fight hand to hand unless the opponent could see the naked skin over throat and heart.

Tros threw his own cloak off and unbuckled the heavy Roman breast-plate, letting it fall with a clank on deck. Then he tore his shirt to lay bare the huge, hairy breast beneath it, and kicked off his high-laced Roman sandals, for he knew how slippery a swaying deck could be.

He was glad then that the sun went down, being minded to spare Orwic what distress he could. He liked him, liked him well enough to take a chance.

"Clear the poop!" he snarled, drawing the long blade.

He took three steps forward, straight at the committee, who were leaning with their backs against the rail. They had to go or else resist him. Orwic said nothing, so they went, one by one, down the ladder. All the other Britons swarmed up on the midship citadel to watch. But even as they were swaying shadows in the gloom, so were Tros and Orwic no more than dim specters. Nobody could see much. There was a catching of deep breaths, no shouting, no other sound than the creaking of cordage and the splosh of the waves against the rolling galley's bilge.

"Are you ready?" asked Tros.

Orwic came at him with a leap, whirling a long sword that made the darkness whistle. Tros met him point first, meaning to stand his ground, but the sparks flew and the blows rained on his blade with a din like a blacksmith's anvil and two hammers going.

He had to sidestep and let Orwic flounder away to leeward down the slippery deck, where he could have skewered him as easily against the poop rail as a butcher sticks a sheep. There was a gasp from the midship citadel, followed by a dozen shouts to Orwic to use the point and not the edge, then silence, broken by a cry from the night and the waves:

"Master! Oh, Master!"

The words were Greek. They sounded to the Britons like the voice of a spirit howling in a wilderness of dark sea. Tros heard them draw their breaths, could almost feel them shudder. He knew the voice, and his heart leaped as he laughed. The old Phœnician had kept faith! Conops! But he had to keep his eyes on Orwic, who was crouching in shadow, watching his chance to spring.

The voice cried again as Orwic drove with the point at Tros's throat, slipping on the wet deck as he lunged. Tros caught the point under his own hilt, jerking with a sudden movement of the wrist that snapped the Briton's blade. Then, swift as a loosed bowstring, before Orwic could recover he struck upward at the Briton's hilt. The broken sword spun overside, humming, and Tros's point touched the naked skin of Orwic's throat.

"Now cry 'Enough!' Say it! Speak!" Tros ordered.

"Kill!" said Orwic, swallowing and breathing through his nose.

He even pressed his throat against the point until Tros lowered it.

"Will you have another sword?" asked Tros, "and fight me till I slay you? Or will you cry 'Enough!' and take my hand? It seems to me no shame that you should yield. Caswallon gave a hundred of you into my hands—"

"Master! Oh, Master!" cried a hollow voice across the waves.

This time the words were in Gaulish, as if Conops had despaired of his native Greek.

"Lo, the sea answers for me," laughed Orwic. "Did you offer your right hand?"

Tros passed his sword into his left, and waited. Orwic stepped closer, and Tros hugged him as a father hugs his son, though he was barely four years older than the Briton. It is experience that makes age.

Then suddenly out of darkness Conops climbed the ship's side, springing for the poop, crying:

"Master! Get the anchor down! Rocks! You're drifting on rocks!"

The Britons all surged aft off the citadel to find out what was happening, but Tros drew his sword again at the head of the poop-ladder.

"Back!" he thundered. "Every mother's son! I'll brain the first who disobeys me! To your oars! Out oars!"

There was no chance that they could row. He gave them something to divert attention. He could hear the sea a-wash among half-hidden rocks. The pounding of waves on a beach had swelled into one continued roar.

"To the oars and save the ship!" he shouted, pounding the sodden drum.

As they fell back, doubting whether to obey him, Conops went scampering between them through the gloom toward the ship's bow. In another second there were thumps and protests as his knife-hilt struck the ribs of seamen, then the splash of the anchor and the hum of a hawser reeling overside.

"She holds!" he roared between his hands a moment later, then charged back to the poop.

"Where is Hiram-bin-Ahab?" Tros asked him.

"A scant mile away, sir, anchored in a cove to leeward of the rocks you came near splitting on!" Conops glanced about him, baring his teeth at Orwic. "Any fighting before we work her out of here? She's riding in twice her depth within a ship's length of the reef. We'd better move."

But Tros could trust that hawser and knew, too. what a frenzied panic the Britons would make of oar work unless he should wait for the sea to die down a bit. There was no top on the sea, but it rolled along, high backed and heavy ahead of the tide.

"Get into your boat and get the sail first, if there's any of it left!" he answered. Then, standing by the poop-ladder: "Man the benches!"

Half of the crew was still doubting whether to obey him.

"What does she look like?" he asked, turning his back to the crew to give them a chance to obey him without feeling they were being driven.

"Fine in the dark," said Conops. "She looks twice her size. I didn't know the cloth was all ripped off the wickerwork until I lay alongside in the boat. If we show up off Caritia Sands at dusk, the Romans'll never doubt us."

He went overside with three of the British seamen and spent half an hour disentangling the sail to spill the water out of it before he shouted: "All clear!"

Then Tros stood over the rest of the twenty and made them haul the sail on deck. Meanwhile, the mist had shifted, gathering itself into a dense bank and following the tide. He could see the reef now and the white line of breakers on the beach beyond it.

"Lud of Lunden Town!" he muttered. "Britons, not being sailors, haven't yet spent their sea-luck!"

He shivered. The reef was almost near enough to spit on.

"Out oars!" he shouted, and this time they obeyed him.

Conops ran to the bow to use his knife-hilt on the seamen's ribs again, forcing them to man the hawser and haul in the slack. Tros pounded slowly on the sodden bull-skin drum, ready to roar to Conops to let go if the rowers should come to grief and lose the steering way.

The oars dipped deep when the galley rolled and scudded on the wave tops when she hove her side skyward, but the anchor came home foot by foot, and Conops let it swing until there was half a mile between them and the reef.

Then, after taking a sounding or two, he let it go and they rolled to it in safety until dawn, with Hiram-bin-Ahab's small boat dancing astern at a long painter's end.

The two men who had come with Conops were a godsend then, for there was the sail to bend on and they had it done before the light wind came that blew away the mist banks and showed Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship rolling easily at anchor, like a living thing that laughed. The great eyes painted on her bow—so that she might see the way home—seemed to wink when the waves half covered them.

"And Skell?" asked Tros, when Conops came up to the poop for a moment's rest.

"First, when the Northmen hove in sight off Thames-mouth, Skell swore he knew them and could make terms," said Conops. "He proposed to show the Northmen the way to Lunden, saying Northmen would not harm a merchant ship * but would be generous in return for such aid as that. He said the Northmen's harvest must have failed and they were coming to seize foothold in Britain.

"But Hiram-bin-Ahab agreed with me there would be a storm before long, and he determined to save Lunden from those pirates if it might be done. So, being sure he had the faster ship, he shortened sail a bit to let them come within arrow range. Then he fired a volley at the nearest one, and shook out reefs, and ran, they giving chase since he had forfeited his rights.

"So he decoyed them until the storm broke and, what with wind and tide, it was too late for them to turn into the river-mouth for shelter. Hey! But he knows how to handle his crew, that old Phœnician! And he handles a ship as if she were a king's mistress!

"When he changed the helm a bit, so that the sea took us under the quarter, Skell was seasick, and riding at anchor hasn't helped him to recover. When I came away he was lying like a dead man on a coil of rope on top of the cargo."

"Is he hurt? You haven't—"

"No, sir. He did call me a liar, as you said he might perhaps. He spoke truth: I changed the lie so often, that he could not do less than turn on me at last.

"No, sir, not the blade, although he tried to use his; no, sir, I didn't tie him; he didn't need it. Those heavy men fall hard. There's a world of chin sticks out under that red beard of his. For a minute or two I feared I'd broken it adrift, and he carries a lump there now as big as a Joppa orange, but the bone's in one piece.

"What troubles him most is his belly. He vomits more than you'd believe a man could hold. Now he thinks he's dead, and now he

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* This seems to have been the unwritten rule. A merchant ship was not molested by the North Sea rovers.

fears he isn't, but he'll be fit enough for mischief when you land him."

"Good," said Tros. "Get back to the Phœnician and tell him, if we both live and ever meet again, there's nothing he mayn't ask of me and see it done! Then come and tell me what this galley looks like from a distance. Try to imagine yourself a Roman in Caritia at dusk.

"If we show up at dusk, we'll have another good excuse for not putting in—shoals, tide, wind. But I want to know whether that basketwork looks like the real thing from a mile or two away. If it does, tell Hiram-bin-Ahab to sail the minute there's a fair wind for Caritia, but make sure he understands we're to turn up there at dusk. Wait! Has Skell seen this galley yet?"

"No, sir. He's lain below ever since seasickness took him."

"Tell Hiram-bin-Ahab to use every ruse he can think of to make Skell *sure* this is a Roman galley straight from Ostia. Let him begin talking smallpox now. Let him ask Skell whether he knows a remedy against it."

CHAPTER XXIII

TROS MAKES A PROMISE

Have I spoken of your folly? Aye, times out of number. But ye are wizards, ye are paragons of judgment and wisdom compared to the braggart who pretendeth to wisdom that he hath not. Again, and again, and again I have said: if brawl ye must, because of follies ye have not outgrown, then brawl like men. I brawl not, because I hate not. Ye who hate, shall ye avoid the pains of hatred by pretending to a virtue that ye have not? It is better, I say, to die in battle than to do lip-service to the Wisdom whose outer threshold ye have not the strength of character to cross.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

All that day and most of the night following, they lay at anchor while Conops spread pitch liberally on the bows and stern and Tros coaxed his Britons back into a friendly frame of mind. First he had to reëstablish Orwic in their estimation. Orwic had plainly mishandled the mutiny, and some of them were disposed to think he had deliberately lost that hand-to-hand fight in the dark.

So he began by asking whether they thought they had a better man than Orwic. He offered to fight any ten of their own choosing, two at a time, which was sheer guile, because he knew their code of honor did not permit of two men fighting one. They catcalled at him from the benches, but none offered to match swords, and they listened when he uttered his great rolling laugh and spoke his mind.

"Orwic is blood of your blood. I am not. He had to listen to you, because you are all his equals more or less. But not I! I am the master of this ship. Who gainsays that?"

There was no answer until after a long pause; Tros was not avoiding issues, he was forcing one.

A bow oarsman shouted the word "coward" at him.

"Since when?" Tros asked, and waited.

But that man did not answer. It was another who shouted: "You ran from two Northmen's ships!"

"As I have eyes, it was the Northmen ran," Tros answered. "As I have eyes, it was Orwic's work that put them both to flight! As I am a sailor and ye are horsemen, it was impossible to follow. But for my hand at the helm, ye would all be among the fish this minute, belly upward, with the sea-birds pecking at your dead eyes!"

"This minute the Northmen are burning our villages!" another voice retorted, and at that there was a murmur of assent.

A heavy man with brown hair down to his shoulders, who pulled the stroke oar on the port side, shouted: "Sail in search of the Northmen now, and we will catch them at Hythe or Pevensey."

"Since when have ye so loved the men of Hythe?" Tros answered. "I was there when Caswallon came to summon them to join him against Cæsar, but not a man from Hythe would go. They said they would hold Hythe, and no more. If they were so sure they could hold it then against the Romans who had beaten such gallant lads as you are, can't they hold it now against mere North Sea rovers? What are two ships when Cæsar had more than a hundred ships full of well-armed Roman infantry?"

He had struck the right note, and he knew it. There was no love lost between Lunden and Hythe and Pevensey since the men of

Lunden and a handful from eastern Kent had to stand off Cæsar's legions without assistance.

"Now listen to me!" he thundered. His hairy breast was naked, which was intimation that he stood there ready to fight whoever challenged him.

"Caswallon gave you into my charge, holding me answerable, bidding you obey me and be valiant. I will neither flinch nor turn aside. Ye shall obey me, or I will fight you one by one! It is not Hythe ye love, or Pevensey. It is your own town and the honor of your women and the fun of burning the Northmen's ships behind them."

There was a cheer, but he raised his hand for silence.

"And now ye help me rescue my father, in which there shall be no fighting if I can help it, since he loves fighting no more than the druids do. But does any man accuse me of not paying what I owe? Has my word ever failed you? I think not. Then hear ye this."

He paused dramatically, but the histrionics were a ruse. He was scanning faces, making sure that the moment was ripe for the master argument.

"Ye shall obey me first, and I will do my business. Then ye shall have your bellyful of Northmen, for I will lead you on such a raid as ye have never imagined. No matter whether we catch those two ships, or whether they escape us, or whether they have wrecked themselves along the coast, or whether the men of Hythe * have slain them all. I will take this ship, or another, and as many of you as dare come with me, and we will raid the Northmen in their own roosts in midwinter when they least expect us. We will let them feel for a change what burned homes mean! Now—?"

He had them. They roared him an ovation, knowing he did what he said he would do. None doubted that promise, except Tros, who made it; it was far too prophetic for him to believe; but it served a purpose. They wanted to get the oars out then and hurry through the business of catching Cæsar, who was unimportant in their

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* The crypt of Hythe Church is full of bones of Northmen killed on the beach. Historians have set a much later—post-Roman—date to the unrecorded battle in which they are presumed to have been killed; but, like many another date "determined" by those same historians, this one is at least doubtful. It is certain that the Northmen regularly raided Britain long before the Romans came.

minds compared to the hereditary enemies who had ravaged their coasts and villages since, according to legend, Britain first rose from the sea.

The Roman was an incident. Northmen were a habit, like wolf hunting and marrying and feasting. Besides, the Northmen fought according to accepted and unwritten rules, which made a sport of it, whereas Cæsar was no gentleman; he fought in armor, and used cosmetics, and wore skirts, and—from what they had heard of him—couldn't even carry liquor handsomely.

There was no more trouble after that, not even need for Conops to keep watch while Tros slept. Tros forbade it, rather than let the Britons think he doubted them. And, two hours after midnight, came the favoring wind, a light air that hardly filled the sail, so that they had to row to keep Hiram-bin-Ahab's curved spar in sight, that could ghost along two ships' lengths to their one.

The wind failed by morning, but they were out in mid-channel then, so that it was an easy matter to time their arrival off Caritia, dawdling along as if they had picked up the Phœnician at sea and were adjusting their speed to his. Hiram-bin-Ahab kept a good three miles away. There was no risk of Skell detecting anything wrong.

Three miles to the windward of Caritia sands Tros backed the oars and dropped anchor, hoisting, as agreed, a white cloth signal at the yardarm, which meant that the Phœnician should proceed.

Hiram-bin-Ahab had all the necessary documents. Tros's father's chance depended solely now on whether the Phœnician should act his part artfully or make some unforeseen mistake.

Tros had a strange, impersonal respect for his old father mixed of many contradictions. As a seaman, who understood strange seas better than most priests know human nature, he almost worshiped him. As an obedient emissary of the Hierophants of Samothrace, he thought him an impractical old visionary.

In theory Tros was willing to admire the mystery-teaching of non-resistance and no vengeance. But in practice he had hung back from initiation beyond the novice's degree—which imposed few obligations—and he forever chafed at his father's prohibitions against taking life. Besides, he knew that his father had been a storming swordsman in his youth.

"Conops," he said, watching the Phœnician's ship through a light mist that dimmed its outline, "that old mariner knows his own mind. He keeps a promise, Romans or no Romans. You know yours. You are a faithful man. I know mine. I will snatch my father out of Cæsar's hands by any means. But who shall know my father's mind? I think he may blame us all because our method is unethical, as if ethics could influence Cæsar."

Conops was not quite sure what ethics were, but he knew Tros's father, having sailed under him since Tros and he were old enough to learn to splice ropes.

"Master, a Prince of Samothrace must be a dreadful thing to be," he answered. "He is not meek, for you and I have quailed under his wrath when we displeased him. So it is not that he does not feel anger or suffer when Cæsar orders the crew beaten to death before his eyes.

"Hey! What a crew that was! Will we ever find such another? No drink; no women in the ports; no knifing, no neglect, never an order disobeyed. And seamanly! Hey! Master!

"And yet your father, who had trained them, saw them flogged, saw them flogged to death—*hey-yeh—tatchah!* And do you suppose, if we gave him a knife, and showed him Cæsar, he would kill?"

"Not he," Tros answered. "But, as I said, I know my own mind. I am not one to balk at killing in extremity. Mind you, I said in extremity. I will have no brawling. I have a father, and I choose to rescue him, whether he approves my way or not."

It was very nearly sundown. The Phœnician's sail was a splurge of red on golden water, blurred a trifle by a mauve mist. The galley rolled gently on the swell and all the Britons were leaning overside, their helmets tilted back as they had seen the Roman legionaries wear them.

But there was very little to be seen except shed roofs ashore, the lines of Cæsar's tent tops and the masts of fifty or sixty ships that lay hauled out on balks of timber under the protection of the camp earthwork.

The town itself, such as it was—shops, booths, drinking-dens, and brothels—was invisible beyond the camp. Cæsar kept the front door clean.

"You see," said Tros, watching Hiram-bin-Ahab's slow, cautious dip and drift toward the port, "in a sense I am the cause of my father's difficulty. He married, and as long as my mother lived he was not eligible for the higher offices.* So they sent him to sea as Legate of the Mysteries. My mother died, but she died giving birth to me.

"So there he was with a son; whereas, if I had not been born, they would have ceased to reckon him a married man and he might have stayed ashore in Samothrace to attain who knows what eminence in the Inner Shrine. Therefore, but for me, he should never have been Cæsar's prisoner. And that, since it makes me responsible, confers on me the right to rescue him."

"Aye, and in your own way," Conops answered. He would have agreed with Tros if he had said that the world was round and not flat. "Zeus! But I would like to burn that camp! Look, Master. If the wind blew from the westward, and a man should creep—"

Silence. Then a murmur all along the ship-side. A liburnian, low in the water and rowed at high speed by a dozen oars, put out from the harbor-mouth and headed straight for Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship. Before the Phœnician could back his sail, the sun went down, leaving the galley no more than a creaking black shadow, invisible from shore. Tros ordered lights out; for he did not want that liburnian to come and hail him.

"To the benches! Out oars!"

He sent Conops to the masthead. Then, muffling the drum, he moved the galley slowly to a new position about three miles to the westward, and waited again, the men resting on the oars. It was a long time before his ears caught the sound of a splash and the creak of cordage.

"Who comes?" he demanded.

"Both!" Conops leaned from the masthead, trying to make himself heard without shouting. "Hiram-bin-Ahab and the liburnian!"

"Man that arrow-engine, Orwic!"

Followed a clicking and squeak as Orwic wound the crank—the rattle of arrows laid in the grooves in a hurry. Then, dimly, Hiram-bin-Ahab's spar loomed out of the dark and a hail came over the water from the liburnian, invisible astern of the Phœnician.

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* Marriage was not held to be a crime, but it stood in the way of advancement, being a concession to materiality and lust, according to that doctrine.

"Oh, Poseidonius!"

Tros prayed to the gods for a Roman accent. A hoarse voice was his best subterfuge, and his heart in his throat rendered that trick simple. But he waited for the man in the liburnian to repeat the hail; and then, when it came, he almost laughed aloud.

The man was no Roman. By his accent he was from Macedonia or Thrace, one of those adventurers who sold their swords to Rome and often rendered much more faithful service than the Romans did. Tros could talk Latin twice as well!

"Keep away!" he roared. "Smallpox! Half the crew sickening! They'll try to jump aboard you if you come close!"

The liburnian backed away. He could hear the hurried oars splash. Then Hiram-bin-Ahab's voice, between coughs, croaking from the poop. Tros could not hear what he said. Then Skell, unmistakable, from the liburnian, in Gaulish, abusing the Phœnician in a voice weak from exhaustion. It appeared he had left money on the ship, and wanted it.

Tros bellowed through cupped hands, omitting verbs because of distance, trusting to the hollow sound to hide discrepancies of accent. The rowers in the liburnian might be Romans, although they probably were not.

"Despatch—Roman Senate—for Cæsar! To-morrow—or next day! Fair wind—tide—"

"Have you food and water?" he in the liburnian called back.

"Yes, for a few days."

"Keep away then! Anchor outside! Send in your despatch by the Phœnician. If you want stores, they can be put aboard his ship for you."

"All right," Tros answered. Then, as he heard the liburnian's oars go thumping off into the darkness: "Now, you friends of the god of pestilence! Let Cæsar only be afraid of catching your complaint from Skell, and I think we have him! Row!"

He beat the drum unmuffled, rolling out the strokes triumphantly, setting a course westward along the coast for the Phœnician to follow. Neither ship showed any lights, so there was no chance of the troops in Caritia knowing which way they had gone.

And because it seemed the gods were blessing the adventure, a light wind blew and wafted them along the coast of Gaul until Hiram-bin-Ahab changed his helm and led the way into a cove he knew. And there they anchored, side by side, a little before dawn. Tros did not dare to leave his Britons so he sent a boat for Hiram-bin-Ahab, who came and sat beside him on the poop.

"There is a village here," said the Phœnician. "But they will run away inland. They will fear we need rowers."

"Skell?" Tros asked him.

The Phœnician laughed, and paid for it, coughed for nearly a minute.

"*Ahkh*—Skell! Sick, yes; but not so very. All the while listening. So he is very sure you are from Ostia; very sure you have a pestilence aboard. He asked whether Tros had gone to Seine-mouth, and in what ship? *Hey-yeh!* I told him—dung to a dog—lies to a liar!

"He offered me money if I would persuade the commander of this galley to put into Seine-mouth and prevent Tros from escaping before Cæsar could come! *Hey-yey!* I let my sailors take the money. They took it from him just before they dropped him into the liburnian. *Yarrh!* But he is angry, angry! He is full of spite."

"Cæsar?" asked Tros.

"The men in the liburnian said Cæsar drills his troops too much because there is nothing else to do. The ships, he said, are all laid up for the winter—hauled out. He was surprised when I said I thought you had despatches from the Senate. He said Cæsar receives despatches overland.

"But I said it was none of my business, only that I was glad to have an escort all the way back to Ostia, and I showed him my permit, signed by you. He could read, but not readily. The seal impressed him."

"And the pestilence?"

"He dreaded it! He did not want to take Skell, fearing my ship might have caught infection. But I said, unless he would take Skell I would sail into the harbor and put him ashore, having your authority to do that.

"Then I told him Skell had information for Cæsar, concerning the Britons, and after that he did not dare to refuse to take him. He laughed, and said, 'Let us hope Cæsar will fear the pestilence, and go away for a while, and give the troops a rest. But I don't envy Skell,' said he, 'because Cæsar will order him to the pest-house, which is no good place.'

"But Skell did not hear that, nor would he have understood, because we conversed in Greek. That fellow is a Macedonian from Pontus, a long way from home. He would have liked to sail with me, although he fears the winter storms."

"Did he ask many questions?"

"Very few. But he said Cæsar would doubtless like to talk with me about the Britons. So I said that Skell, being born in Britain, knew more of them than I did, I being merely a trader in tin, conveying my tin to Ostia for the bronze founders.

"He understood that well enough, but he was puzzled to know why you should risk your galley down the coast of Hispania in winter-time, until I told him Rome was in dire straits for tin and you had been sent to look for me and bring me in spite of winter and storms and everything."

"Good!" exclaimed Tros. "You are a man after my own heart, a friend, a lordly liar in emergency!"

"We run a great risk yet," the Phœnician answered. "It may be, Cæsar will not believe Skell. It may be, he will not fear pestilence. It may be, he will be there when we go back to Caritia. What then?"

"We will go soon," Tros answered. "They have hauled out their ships, you say? They can't condition a ship for fighting in less than three or four days. So, if Cæsar smells a rat and sends out the liburnians to seize you, I will rub my Britons' noses into a fight that'll do the rogues good.

"Understand me, Hiram-bin-Ahab: *I* am no Prince of Samothrace. If I don't get my father, I will do such damage to the Romans as shall make them remember me."

CHAPTER XXIV

ROME'S CENTURION

He who is loyal and faithful to false gods, and who beareth himself manfully in a false cause—aye, and though that cause mean ruin for all who obey him, and all who oppose him—that one, in the scales of the Eternal weigheth well. Aye, he is infinitely greater than the fool who serveth Wisdom with his lips, but in his heart serveth malice, greed, ambition, fame or any other of the weaknesses that strength despiseth and that Wisdom no more knoweth than the Light knoweth darkness. Hold ye fast to faith and loyalty; and though ye slay me for a false cause, ye shall stand forgiven.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Though Tros was not a Prince of Samothrace, he had lived in much too close association with his father, who was one, not to be influenced by the occult philosophy that governed every detail of his father's life.

The secrets of the Inner Mysteries Tros did not know; the power that Samothracian Hierarchs could wield, should they decide to do so, over circumstances and events he thoroughly believed in. He simply was unwilling to pay the price, in abstinence and selflessness, required of aspirants to Initiation, and it was against the drastically administered law of the Mysteries for his father to oblige, persuade or even to invite him to make that effort.

Necessarily, however, he was influenced by his father's views. He habitually ascribed to an Unseen Force things which to other people appeared as mere coincidence.

Tros was less superstitious, more devout, and a vastly more intelligent believer in the Unseen, than most men of his generation. He acknowledged a whole pantheon of gods, but never prayed to them, believing them to be innumerable aspects of a First Cause, whose formless Being was unthinkable, and whose name—supposing anybody knew it—it was blasphemy to utter.

Hiram-bin-Ahab, steeped in strange monotheism tinged by Jewish teaching, was a member of a minor Mystery to which Tros, too, belonged. The world was full of such secret brotherhoods, some based on the Jewish Cabala, some on eastern lore, and all intended to preserve the idea of Brotherhood in the face of cruel superstitions and a growing atheism.

So Tros and Hiram-bin-Ahab—good pious opportunists—were of one mind at dawn, or a little after, when Conops returned from a scouting venture ashore and announced that Cæsar had already passed through a near-by village.

"The gods," said Tros, "have been instructed to make this easy for us."

He did not believe that any gods did more than that; the rest was left to human energy.

"Certainly," Hiram-bin-Ahab agreed. "Your noble father must have seen with his third eye* what we are doing. He has summoned the gods† to our aid. We can not fail."

Conops had his own opinion.

"Master, you have more brains than a shipload of kings' uncles! Cæsar left Caritia at once. I found one fisherman ashore there, and he lame. He said a chariot came summoning all hands to a place a three hours' journey inland to repair a road, Cæsar having passed along it in the night and complained of its bad condition."‡

"The tide serves. No storm—no storm!" Tros warned the weather-gods, his eyes on the horizon. "Up anchor, Conops!"

So with oars and flapping sails, for the wind only came in capsful, they dawdled back toward Caritia, keeping well off-shore and timing themselves to arrive again at dusk.

Tros dropped anchor five miles out, but this time he left Conops in charge of the galley and, divesting himself of Roman clothes and armor, wrapping his head in a knotted handkerchief, had himself rowed to Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship, where one of the crew curled his beard for him in the Phœnician style.

"Sail in as close as you dare," he said, pacing the Phœnician's poop.

But as the masts of Cæsar's ships and the tent tops began to appear in detail through the haze—and that was nearly half an hour before the sun went down—two liburnians came rowing at top speed from the harbor mouth, a man in the leading one signaling with a red cloth to the Phœnician to come no farther.

The crews of both liburnians stopped rowing when they came within hail. The man with the red cloth stood up in the stern, bellowing through a speaking trumpet:

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* A synonym for occult vision.

† The gods were the various aspects of natural forces, obedient to such men as knew how to command them. Hiram-bin-Ahab's near-monotheism did not preclude his use of the expression "gods."

‡ Cæsar habitually traveled at the rate of one hundred miles a day, and was, consequently, very particular about the condition of the roads on which mobility depended. They were built and repaired by forced labor.

"Cæsar's orders! You are not to put in to Caritia! Smallpox! Stores—water—elsewhere! Away with you! Proceed at once to Ostia."

It was Tros who answered, giving a rich Greek accent rein:

"We know Cæsar is not in Caritia! We have Cæsar's command in writing to bring away a prisoner named Perseus, who is to be taken to Rome for trial on charges of conspiracy."

"Who are you?" demanded he in the liburnian, bringing his boat a few lengths closer. It was growing very dark.

"Mate of this ship."

"Why doesn't the captain speak?"

"His voice fails. He coughs," Tros answered, signing to Hiram-bin-Ahab to stand up and be seen.

"When did you receive Cæsar's order?"

"Last night, when Cæsar visited a cove in which we dropped anchor."

"Did the commander of the bireme deliver Cæsar's writing to *you?*"

"Yes. Smallpox. Five of his crew are down with it. He hopes to reach Vectis, where he may land the crew for a while without risk of desertions or of spreading the sickness among Roman troops. Thereafter, if the winds permit, he will proceed to Ostia."

There was a conference between the captains of the two liburnians. They appeared to be men of the centurion type—the non-commissioned backbone of Rome's army—men used to emergency in every corner of the empire, not supposed or encouraged to be original, but marvelous disciplinarians, obedient unto death.

"Cæsar's orders are: 'No communication with you!'" one of them shouted at last.

"Our order, in Cæsar's writing, supersedes that," Tros retorted.

There was another conference. Then:

"The prisoner you seek is dead or dying."

Tros swore under his breath. There was a long pause before he could get his voice under control. His only chance of success was to seem utterly indifferent. His impulse was to sink the two liburnians and drown their crews.

"Torture!" he growled under his breath, and Hiram-bin-Ahab nodded.

"Maybe Cæsar hopes the pestilence may finish him!" he roared at last, for the Liburnians had backed away. "Put him aboard. The outcome is none of your affair!"

The Liburnians came closer again.

"Put Cæsar's writing into something that will float, and throw it at us," shouted a centurion.

"No!" roared Tros. "Poseidonius the Roman, who commands the bireme, spoke thus: 'Give them the writing in exchange for the prisoner. Not otherwise!' Poseidonius must answer to the Senate. Shall he give you his authority and whistle to the wide seas for his man? What kind of officers are you, to try that trick? Bring out the prisoner! There may be a wind before morning, and we want to make the tide."

There was another conference, and then the Liburnians rowed away. Tros shouted after them:

"Poseidonius says this: 'Unless you deliver the prisoner promptly, he will sail into the harbor at dawn, and you must take your chance with the pestilence. Having Cæsar's writing, he will not be delayed. He is in haste to proceed to Vectis.'"

Hiram-bin-Ahab gestured and croaked from out of his doubled and redoubled shawls:

"A mistake! A mistake! They will not believe a bireme dares to land a crew on Vectis. A trader, yes. A warship, no."

Tros clicked his teeth irritably.

"I had to tell them some place! Maybe they will think you told me of Vectis. You are a trader. They may suppose I don't know the people of Vectis are warlike."

But Hiram-bin-Ahab shook his head. He looked like an old vulture of ill omen. Then worse happened—and worse again!

Over the water from the galley came the noise of singing and a row of dots of light gleaming through the cabin ports.

"They have broached the mead!"

Tros thrust a paper into the Phœnician's hands.

"Don't part with that until they hand my father over. Hoist him aboard with the halyard. Satisfy yourself that he really is Perseus, Prince of Samothrace. Then throw them the document. If I don't quiet those idiots they'll—"

He went overside into a small boat like a squall out of a dark sky, and the British rowers nearly broke their backs to try to please him. Ten minutes later he leaped up the galley's side, and the first thing he saw was Conops lashed hand and foot to the mast with a gag in his teeth. He cut him loose and rushed into the cabin under the poop.

Orwic sat on the table drinking mead, surrounded by as many as could crowd themselves into the place. The remainder were in the citadel. They were roaring a long chorus about Lunden Town.

Tros stood back to the doorway, his strong teeth glinting in the light of the horn lantern, until surprise took full effect and all grew silent.

"You're a fine shipload of meat-fed[*] Romans with the smallpox!" he growled, grinning. "Were you going to eat Conops next?"

"Your man was too full of his own importance," Orwic drawled. "He actually knifed a friend of mine. Where's Cæsar? Are we ready to start back? Here—have some mead."

Tros drank with him. There was only one horn of the stuff aboard, supposed to be for medicine. The best plan seemed to be to finish it.

"If you'll hold your tongues," he said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, "and make those young asses in the citadel douse the lights and be quiet, I'll give you a crack at Cæsar before you're two days older. Otherwise, I'll guarantee you at the bottom of the sea by midnight! Suit yourselves!"

Orwic strolled forward to the citadel, his apparently casual eyes alert for Conops, who fingered an empty sheath and glared at him. Presently the singing ceased and lights went out. Tros sat on the table, playing boon companion, for there was no other way just then of managing those gentry.

"Here's your knife," said Orwic cavalierly, tossing the thing to Conops as he came back out of the darkness. "Keep it for your equals, or your betters will have to have you whipped."

"Don't you young idiots know," said Tros, "that the gloomiest place on earth is a Roman bireme that has been two months at sea, as we're supposed to have been? The crew are always down with scurvy. You have smallpox in the bargain!

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[*] Roman soldiers and sailors usually mutinied if their rations contained too much meat. Cæsar writes of his men's heroism when, on one occasion, they ate meat for several days.

"To enforce discipline, the commander has used the scourge; he has thrown men overboard; he has chained unruly rowers to the benches. He's as sick and ill-tempered as the rest of you. He has boils on the back of his neck. The omens are all wrong; they always are when a man has specks before his eyes.

"You've been fed dry meat, which a Roman hates and moldy bread, which sickens you to look at. There are rats in the water casks, so you're afraid to drink. You're short of fuel, so you can't boil water or cook your rations. There's a curtain of weed a yard long on the galley's bottom, which trebles the labor of rowing. The bottom leaks and you have to man the buckets day and night.

"The sail won't draw, because it's full of holes, which your fingers are too swollen and cracked to mend. The ship stinks. Such blankets as you have are full of vermin. You hate one another even worse than you hate your officers.

"If those people in Caritia get a hint that you're merrymaking, they'll not stop to argue. They'll know we're no Romans from Ostia! As you love Lunden Town and hope to see it, be miserable!"

He had to carry on in that vein. He had to tell them tales of Roman ships he had seen in foreign ports, coming in with a crucified * man at the masthead and the rowers so rotten with scurvy that their teeth had fallen out and the skin fell away from them like scales from a decaying fish.

"You're supposed to be feeling like that," he insisted.

And when they had finished laughing at him, being Britons, they found an entirely different reason for doing what he asked.

"You're a foreigner, so I suppose we must make allowances," said Orwic.

Tros got up the anchor and set them to rowing, lest the liburnians sneak out on him in the darkness to investigate.

The Romans were quite capable of that. Julius Cæsar had been known to swim broad rivers under cover of the night, to do his own

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* The victim was hardly ever nailed. He was tied with rope, and left to suffer from sun, flies and thirst. The same form of punishment was used by armies in the field as recently as 1918.

scouting when he doubted the tales that were brought to him. But if liburnians had come, their crews would have heard such dismal groanings at the oars, such cries of anguish, as might have made them believe it was a prison ship.

Orwic, with some pitch smeared on his arms and legs to represent the scurvy, walked up and down the plank beside the rowers flourishing a cord with which he made believe to flog them, and nothing would satisfy them until Tros sent a man to the masthead to pretend he was crucified up there. Now that they were over seasickness they seemed to understand no middle course between comedy and mutiny.

Tros, forgetting that man at the masthead, for he soon grew tired of groaning, steered the galley slowly toward Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship, arriving within easy hail about a minute before the liburnians came thumping through the night. Then he implored his crew to be silent, gesticulating with both fists, and the Britons leaned on the oars to listen, not that they could understand a word of Latin. There was nothing visible except the dim, shadowy outline of the Phœnician's ship.

"Here's your man!" cried some one.

"What is his name?"

That was Hiram-bin-Ahab's voice, wheezy and suspicious.

"Perseus."

"Is he alive? I won't take him if he's dead."

"Yes, he lives. Come on, throw a line! And hand over that written order!"

"There goes the line—catch! *Yarrh*—what duffers! Throw again there, you. Now. What's that? No! I'll throw you down the writing when I've seen the man. Put the rope under his armpits. Gently now—haul away—gently, gently, gently!"

Silence, in which everybody held his breath. Then the Phœnician's voice:

"All right. Here is the writing. Catch."

Tros sighed relief. The Britons, all eyes on his silhouette against the poop rail, saw the shoulder movement and sighed with him, swinging the oars for the dip. The man at the masthead heard that, and accepted it as leave to play the idiot—he had a gallon of good mead under his painted leather armor.

"*Wow!*" he yelled. "*Hai!* You there, Romans! Tell Caesar, next time he tries to conquer Britain—"

"Silence!" Tros thundered, but too late.

There was a roar of laughter from the hold. The Liburnians came hurrying to investigate, their oars churning the water in short, sharp strokes.

Their officers knew Gaulish when they heard it, even if they had not caught the words. Hiram-bin-Ahab, making no sound, let his ship swing slowly on the tide. There came the sudden creak and rattle of his mainsail going up, and a man in one of the Liburnians shouted to him to drop anchor.

"Poseidonius! O Poseidonius!" cried a voice from the other Liburnian, nearly alongside.

Tros did not answer. He pounded the drum and the oars began to thump in unison. But he had to swing the ship before he could hoist sail. There was hardly any wind at that, and the Liburnians could out-row him two for one. A low, dark, skilfully manœuvered vessel shot in under his stern, and again a voice hailed him:

"Hey, there! Poseidonius!"

"Drown him!" yelled the Britons. "Plug him full of arrows!"

The man at the masthead offered himself for a target to the Romans, waving arms and legs and caterwauling. Tros had to make the best of it.

"Come aboard," he suggested in his choicest Latin, speaking drily, imitating Caesar's voice as nearly as he could. Then:

"Stand by that arrow-engine, Conops. Man the crank there, you! Come aboard, Centurion! Did you hear me? Come aboard!"

He beckoned. Orwic and a dozen Britons left the oars and crouched under the bulwark. The Liburnian had come in under the galley's counter, too close for the arrow-engines, its bow nosing in under the starboard oars. The other Liburnian was keeping a safe distance.

Tros lowered a thick rope with knots in it. The centurion, half curious, half conscious there was nothing else he could do unless he chose to be shot or sunk, came up hand-over-hand.

He was allowed to reach the poop before the Britons pounced on him and took his sword away. He offered no resistance so they let him stand, with Orwic close behind him and two others ready to jump on him if he should move. He stood like a man, with his chin high and a short, stubby, pugnacious beard sticking out under it.

"What is this?" he demanded.

He was not afraid. He was scandalized that a foreigner should dare to take such liberties with Rome. Tros loved him.

"Centurion," he said, "tell me first, is my father unharmed? I am Tros, the son of Perseus, Prince of Samothrace."

"So you are he?" said the centurion. "Your father has been treated as you will be, when Cæsar catches you! They who conspire against the Senate and the Roman People, all get their deserts in time!"

"Has Cæsar tortured him?"

"I believe he was racked."

Tros ground his teeth and spoke to Orwic over the centurion's shoulder.

"He is your prisoner. What do you wish?"

"He is yours," said Orwic. "Do what you like with him."

"Do you hear that?" said Tros. "You are my prisoner." The centurion nodded. He seemed perfectly indifferent. "Take back your sword then and obey me. Tell Cæsar, when the day comes I will deal with him and not with a centurion! Tell Rome, the Senate and the Roman People, that I, Tros, am the enemy of Rome from this day forth!"

Tros signed to the Britons to stand aside.

"No enemy of Rome lives long!" the centurion answered. "Farewell, Tros!" There was a clank of bronze as he saluted. "I will deliver your message, although I think you are a fool. Cæsar will crucify you for it."

CHAPTER XXV

"GOD GIVE YOU A FAIR WIND, HIRAM-BIN-AHAB!"

Better far the good faith of one stranger to another than a thousand times a thousand vows upon the altars of gods who look, I say, for deeds, not promises.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

The other liburnian tried to head off Hiram-bin-Ahab and force him to drop anchor, but the wind came athwart tide and current, lending the Phœnician heels and forcing the smaller craft to run for shelter. Tros paced the poop, fretting at the galley's slowness as he followed in the Phœnician's wake.

The Britons were all cock-a-hoop and skylarking, Orwic imitating the centurion, thrusting out his throat and chin exactly as the Roman did. And one of the others took off Tros so perfectly, hilt forward, arms akimbo, feet apart, teeth showing in a large, alert grin, that even Tros came out of his dudgeon at last and laughed.

"You young dogs! You have lost Cæsar for me! You would laugh if Lunden burned."

"Lost him? Wait and see," said Orwic.

"See? You shall see a fight, or I don't know the Romans. They can overtake Cæsar with a message much faster than we can sail to Seine-mouth. That is why I gave that centurion something for the messenger to say."

"Why then go to Seine-mouth? Why not leave Cæsar whistling?" Orwic suggested.

"I told Caswallon I will go to Seine-mouth, and I will. I told Hiram-bin-Ahab I will escort him, and I will. I told Cæsar, by the mouth of Skell, that I will go to Seine-mouth. So I will. I have promised you a brush with Cæsar. You shall have one."

He was grateful for the rising sea, that made it dangerous to approach the Phœnician closely. He did not want any conversation with his father just then, felt too sure the old man would forbid vindictiveness, with his dying breath, perhaps. Tros could not stomach such an interview. He knew that if his father should exact such a promise from him he would make it and keep it. He preferred not to run that risk.

"Let the gods attend to it," he growled, turning to face Conops at the helm. "My father and the gods are intimates. If it is right for him to bind me in his violenceless peace before he dies, let them bring us together."

Conops did not answer. He knew that mood just as well as he knew that he and Tros could cross that intervening quarter-mile of sea in a boat, if Tros cared to do it.

They had sailed much rougher seas together, in worse boats than the hide-and-wicker thing they carried. Conops, lacking an eye because he had dared to answer Cæsar pertly, also would have obeyed Tros's father if commanded with the old man's dying breath to let bygones be.

Like Tros, though, he craved no such injunction. He respected the old man as much as Tros did. Like Tros, loved him well enough to run all risks to snatch him out of Cæsar's hands. But, like Tros again, knew too well, from grim experience, that the peace of non-resistance is a warfare that does not suit uninitiated men. It is easier and more exciting to fight Cæsars than to wrestle with emotions in oneself.

So they boiled and plunged along in the Phœnician's wake, he standing well out from the shore, until dawn found them nearly out of sight of land and the gale increasing. It was almost too rough to keep footing on the deck, but Tros made Orwic drill the Britons with bow and arrow and train them at imaginary floating marks with the well-oiled arrow-engines. They grumbled because he would not let them use up ammunition, even threatened to defy him.

"Very well," he answered. "Fight with bare hands if you choose. Cæsar will be lying up for us in Seine-mouth with all the ships he can find. If we come on him at night, and see him first, we may burn his ships. If not, and if he sees us first, we shall be hard put to it to guard that old Phœnician's rear while he makes his escape homeward.

"As I know Cæsar, we will need every arrow we have, and pray for more before we're through with him!"

So they loosed bows at an imaginary mark, practising the quick combination of hand and eye at any angle that is the secret of efficient marksmanship.

"Speed," Tros urged them. "Speed! Three arrows in the air at once, and all aimed straight."

"Cæsar will have no arrow-engines," Conops reminded him. "His warships are laid up for the winter. The best he can get will be Gaulish fishermen or merchantmen, slow, slower than we are, low in the water, leaky. Give us half a gale like this one, and—"

"I know Cæsar," Tros retorted. "That fox will have a trap set."

And he paced the poop again, pounding his palm in his fist, pondering, matching his wits against the cleverest Roman of them all.

His main objective was to escort the Phoenician to open sea and safety. Would Cæsar guess that? Much would depend on what Skell might have told. If they had thrown Skell into a pest-house and conversed with him across the dung heap that surrounded it, Skell might have said almost anything.

Tros made up his mind at last that, whatever Skell had said, Cæsar would conclude now that it was all part of one and the same trick. Cæsar would learn by messenger that two ships, one a trader, one a captured Roman galley, were acting with forged documents in close coöperation. He would do his utmost to catch both ships.

And if he believed that Seine-mouth story at all, he would probably take such ships as he could get and put to sea, with the idea of bottling both in the river-mouth if they should enter. Failing which, if the whole tale were a ruse, he would stand a good chance of catching both ships in the open. Cæsar was the last man in the world likely to sit still and let things happen to him.

The second objective—and Cæsar might guess that too—was to place his father, dead or living, among friends. If he should die there were rites that he, Tros, only he, could properly perform. Dry land, Britain, Lunden, with the druids helping, was the proper place for them.

The third objective was to punish Cæsar drastically, to capture Cæsar if he could.

He finally made up his mind that Cæsar would be no such fool as to risk his own life in a hurriedly conditioned ship, without very definite information as to where the enemy might be. He would send his men to sea, and wait for the cavalry, or whatever other troops he might have available, at some point whence he could signal and conduct the operations.

But he was sure of this: That wherever the fighting should take place, there Cæsar would arrive, if it were possible, to take command if his men were having the worst of it and to seize for himself the credit in any event.

High noon saw Tros still thinking and Hiram-bin-Abeb hove to, waiting for him, with a big sea wetting the ships' decks as they plunged with a couple of miles between them, nearly out of sight of land.

When Tros had brought his galley within hailing distance and had quieted his Britons so that he could hear, the Phœnician's mate howled to him that the man at the masthead had reported three sails low down on the horizon near the Gaulish shore, proceeding westward. He added that Tros's father was unconscious in the cabin.

"Has he spoken?"

Tros waited for the answer with his fingers clenched into his palms, and sighed enormously when it came at last, howled through a speaking trumpet:

"No-o-o! No word!"

"Then we are not forbidden!"

He slapped Conops on the shoulder.

"Tell your master," he howled back, "to keep behind me until nightfall!"

Then he took the lead and set full sail, in order to arrive within sight of Seine-mouth as near sunset as he could, sparing his Britons all labor at the oars, making them eat and rest, using every trick he knew to make them conscious that the effort of their lives was coming.

There was no more sign of Cæsar's ships, although he had Conops at the masthead, and Conops' one eye was worth a score of other men's. There was no sign even of fishing boats, a fact not wholly accounted for by the high sea that was running. Men who fish for a living often have to haul their nets in half a gale. The sea was empty, in the way the fields are when a thousand men lie ambushed.

He dropped anchor and lowered his sail within sound of the surf that pounded on the mud banks off the estuary, a little too near sunset to satisfy him entirely, wishing Cæsar keener vision than the eagles whose images were perched on Roman standards.

And there he waited, rolling comfortably in the mud bank's lee, studying the color of the water and the inshore landmarks, until Hiram-bin-Ahab came within hail and dropped anchor astern of him. Then he and Conops rowed to the Phœnician's ship.

"What now?" asked the Phœnician.

But Tros went straight to his father, down under the poop in the cabin crowded with skins, wicker baskets and a hundred other marvels for the Alexandrian trade. There were several nightingales [*] in a wicker cage, and a starling with a cut tongue, who could talk a dozen words.

Tros's father lay on the Phœnician's bed, calm as in death, his eyes closed and the tortured wrists crossed on his breast. His long gray beard appeared to have been combed by one of Hiram-bin-Ahab's men, and the torn skin of his ankles had been wrapped in linen.

"Tchuh, tchuh, tchuh! They racked his joints apart!" said the Phœnician.

Conops knelt by the tortured feet, muttering Greek blasphemies. Tros stood scowling, hands behind him, grinding strong teeth.

"Has he spoken?" he asked.

"Not a word," said the Phœnician.

But it was as if the old man had reserved his strength for what he knew was coming. His lips moved two or three times. Then the voice came, as if from another world, as if the soul had left the body and were using it for one last communication. It was so dark Tros could hardly see his father's face.

"Tros, my son, you would obey my will. But that is not my will. I, who was a fighter in my youth, ceased from fighting with men's weapons. But I, Perseus, sowed the seeds of fighting when I fathered you. And now knowing the full strength of your obedience you dread what I will lay upon you. But I forbid nothing; since the seed that may not sprout in one way breaks forth in another.

"Hear my last words and remember them. All warfare is with self. All that you know of Cæsar is your own image, cast in the reflection of your own unconscious thought. Be brave. Be noble. You shall know strange seas.

"But you shall not slay Cæsar, though you try, since that is others' destiny. Cæsar shall serve you, and you shall serve him, each to the other's undoing, but many things will happen before that time. And now, my son Tros, I have finished with the body that begat yours and its wanderings. In your hands, Tros, I leave it. Let it not be cast into the sea or lie unburied."

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[*] In Cleopatra's reign, a few years later, nightingales were plentiful in the Grove of Eleusis, near Alexandria.

So Perseus died, in darkness, in a creaking ship, the silence pulsed with heavy breathing and stirred by the fluttering of nightingales in a swaying wicker cage. After a long while Tros and Conops wrapped the body carefully and rowed it to the galley, where they laid it on the bed that had been Cæsar's and covered it with Cæsar's own cloak.

Then Tros returned to the Phœnician and said good-by to him.

"For whether I fail to-night, or whether I succeed, you must run when Cæsar's ships come hurrying in on the tide. Your man saw three ships. There were likely six or seven; maybe more. Cæsar has seen us anchor here. He will think we await the tide to take us up the river.

"I am sure that beacon, yonder to westward, where a hill looms back of the coastline, is his signal to the ships to come out from their hiding place and follow us up-river.

"So now you and I put to sea again, showing no lights, and when the last of Cæsar's ships puts in, I follow! But you turn homeward. God give you a fair wind, Hiram-bin-Ahab! And may we meet again!"

CHAPTER XXVI

"NEITHER ROME NOR I FORGIVE!"

Speak not to me of forgiveness until ye first learn to forgive yourselves for all the treacheries with which ye have betrayed that Inner Light of which ye are the shrines, each one of you. It is a dark saying, but I tell you: None can forgive or be forgiven, who hath not learned to forgive himself his sins against himself.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

TROS boiled with mixed emotions. Had his father, dying, not assured him he would live and know strange seas? Could this night's venture fail, then? Such men as Perseus speak prophetically on a deathbed.

Tortures such as Cæsar had inflicted flay away personal values and leave nothing in the thought but sheer fact, which was why courts applied torture to witnesses. If they had tortured the judges, too, there might have been some sense in it.

He should not slay Cæsar, since that was others' destiny. Might he not capture Cæsar? He and the Roman were to serve each other, each to the other's undoing. Nothing in that about not punishing Cæsar first.

With all his heart and strength, with all his cunning, to the limit of the bold, storm-daring will that glowed behind his amber eyes, Tros burned to punish Cæsar. He was in a mood that night to kill a hundred men, if only the lean rascal who had conquered Gaul might pay the price.

And dark night favored him. Wind howled in the rigging, but there was not much weight behind it, and presently the rain came down in torrents, beating the waves flat. Tide served the Romans too, perfectly. Two hours before midnight he could count eight swaying lights to westward, and knew he had outguessed Cæsar. The Roman ships were coming into Seine-mouth from some hiding place along the coast; they were sure he and the Phœnician were up the river and that they could cut off their escape.

But the galley wallowed in the murk a good two miles to windward of them, under a scrap of sail, with the oars a-dip at intervals to keep her from drifting inshore. Farther, still, to seaward Hiram-bin-Ahab's ship lay hove to, waiting for the last Roman light to sway clear of Seine-mouth shoals and turn up-river before she filled away with the northerly wind abeam and plunged for home.

The shore line was invisible. But Cæsar had set that beacon on a hilltop to guide his own ships. Now another light appeared, up the estuary, big, low down, almost as if a house were burning near the shore line.

"Cæsar," said Tros to himself. "That's where the troops are waiting. Hah! He'll have twenty or thirty boats there, hidden among the reeds. And he's as sure I'm up the river as I'm sure— Conops," he exclaimed, taking the helm himself, "tide's been making four hours. We've got until it turns—not a minute longer! Up-river, at grips with Cæsar—out again on the flow at daybreak."

"And the dirtiest mess of mud shoals ever a ship sat on!" Conops retorted. "Wind enough to drive her beak in as if she'd grown there! A heavy sea astern!"

"Make sail," Tros answered. "Then get forward and take soundings. Keep on crying me the cubits until I say 'Cease.' If we do hit bottom, hurry aft and stand by me."

Came the creak and groan and thunder of a mainsail rising, impatient shouts from Conops; then the galley heeled and headed straight for Seine-mouth with a burst of rain behind her, that curtained everything except a glimpse of foam boiling in the pitch dark.

Nothing but the wind to steer by; no sign of Cæsar's beacons. Thunder, solid and continuous, of surf on mud banks; then friendly thunder, from the sky, lightning, that made Tros swear at first, until he laughed aloud.

It showed him a line of white surf boiling over shoals, and Cæsar's eight ships wallowing too close to it. Mean little ships, Gaulish coastwise trading vessels, black with men, not too near to the shoals if given sea room to the eastward, but much too near if crowded by an enemy. White water ahead of them, where the 'tween-shoal channel narrowed.

"Orwic! Four men in the fighting top! Man starboard arrow-engines! Ten men on the citadel! Line the starboard rail. Hold fire until I give the word—dagger the man who shoots without permission!"

Flash after flash of lightning. Eight ships staggering before the wind in rough formation like a flight of geese, the shorter arm of the V to eastward. They were all too close together, aiming for a channel they evidently knew, too watchful to look behind them, or the lightning might have shown them the galley's sail in time.

"Ten!" howled Conops, pitching his shrill voice against the wind.

The galley drew seven cubits.

"Stand by! Ready, all!" Tros thundered, not changing the helm a hair's breadth, trusting memory.

"Nine!" yelled Conops.

Then three vivid lightning-flashes in succession, and Tros did change the helm—excitedly. He saw dark water, headed for it.

"Eight!" yelled Conops, as if the end of the world had come.

He was heaving the lead from the starboard chains. The galley's port side bumped the mud and her stern swung westward. But she heeled, for they did not let go the sheet, and the next wave, and the next, that crashed against the high poop drove her into deeper water.

"Ten!" yelled Conops, hurrying aft, for she had hit the mud, and that was orders. "Deep water straight ahead, sir!" he bellowed in Tros's ear.

"Aye! And shallow to westward! We have them!" Tros answered.

He was laughing, not at what the lightning showed, for that was tragedy; no sailor laughs to see men drown. He was laughing at his Britons, drenched to the skin, their bow-strings wrapped dry in their cloaks, who had not even known they were in danger when they bumped the mud!

The Romans had seen him at last. They were in panic, with a boiling shoal on their right hand and an enemy coming down on them to windward. The rain ceased, but the wind rose.

Cæsar's beacon shone out of the night like something that had been asleep. There was another, lower light to shoreward of it. Tros guessed they showed the channel and set his course straight for the two, keeping them in line, with the wind on his port quarter, racing to crowd those eight ships on the shoal to westward of the channel, where the estuary curved to the eastward. He had the wind of them and, slow though the galley was, she could outsail any of those eight.

Three ships clawed around and tried to beat to sea again. He could hear the thumping and the shouts as they struggled to man the oars. One ship's sail went with a crack as if her mast had gone, too. One was swamped within a bowshot of the galley's bows.

Tros beaked the third, driving the great iron-shod ram into her broadside, rolling her over and sinking her as the galley pitched on a wave.

The Britons squandered arrows, orders or no orders, Orwic with the rest of them, smiting Conops on the mouth, backhanded, when the Greek tried to pull him away from the poop arrow-engine. Then arrows began to rain on the galley's deck from the five ships that struggled with wind and tide like dancing phantoms in the wedge-shaped channel entrance.

One of them went aground and the waves burst over her with a din like thunder. Four, under staggering oars and badly handled sail, raced neck and neck, masking one another's fire, Roman-fashion risking all in one supreme effort to grapple and have the fight out on the bireme's deck.

Tros beaked the nearest as she swung, with her sheets let go, but a dozen Romans leaped into the bireme's bows, where they were massacred with arrow fire from Orwic's engine, that came near cutting down the Britons who rushed to use their swords.

There was no discipline. No order, no command could have been heard above the shouting and the crash of breaking ships.

Two more of Cæsar's ships collided, and Tros beaked them both, breaking the first on the bows of the other and leaving both to drift on the deafening shoal. But their arrows swept the citadel, and the shock of collision had stopped the bireme's way, nearly splitting the sail.

Conops let both sheets go in the nick of time to save the bireme from capsizing. And before they could get the mainsail sheeted down again, with ten of Orwic's Britons dragged and driven aft to help the sailors, the last of Cæsar's ships had crashed alongside.

Grapples struck into the deck and pierced the bulwark. Fifty of Cæsar's legionaries leaped up the bireme's side, and the fight was on in darkness, with the two ships grinding together in the trough of steep waves.

Then the beacon lights went out, or else were screened. The wind increased to a full gale, and though the moon showed once or twice between the racing clouds there was nothing to show the channel's course. The Romans, silent, shoulder to shoulder on the heaving deck, were driving the Britons fore and aft in front of them.

Tros trusted then to the gods, and his father's prophecy, and the strength of the Roman's grappling chains. He put the helm hard up, until the small ship struck the mud and the bireme's weight hammered her into it.

Then he sprang from the poop, let go the sheets and, with a shout that the Britons heard above the din of sea and crashing timbers and loose sail, plunged into the fight.

Part of the bireme's bulwark broke away. She swung down wind in mid-channel, anchored by the other grapnel to the wrecked, swamped, smaller ship, tugging at it like a hooked sea monster, until none could keep his footing and Tros nearly rolled through the gap in the broken bulwark, at grips with a Roman centurion.

Blood and spray churned into scum. A dozen Britons, cornered in the bow, loosed flight after flight of arrows humming through the darkness, so that both sides struggled for the shelter of the citadel. And it was there that Tros's long sword began to turn the tide of battle, for he caught the stoutest Roman of them all and skewered him through the throat against the bulkhead.

Then Orwic sprang beside him from the shadow, dripping blood from scalp wounds—his Roman helmet had gone overboard—and Conops found Tros, guarding his back with a flickering two-edged knife. They three swept that section of the deck, rallying other Britons to them, until Tros thought of a ruse. But as he thought of it the bireme broke the grapnel chain at last and plunged up-channel, beam to the waves and swaying drunkenly before the wind.

So he seized Orwic's quivering arm and tugged him—no need to signal Conops, who was like a dog at his master's heel. They three, and a dozen after them, sprang for the poop, where Conops took the helm and tried to keep mid-channel. Tros stood sword in hand at the edge of the poop bull-bellowing, in Latin, lungs outthundering the din:

"Omen! An omen! Cæsar's eagle, falling from the sky!"

His voice burst on a pause. Briton and Roman were gathering for another rush. The Romans, superstitious about omens to the verge of madness, turned to look at him.

The eagle they saw was Tros, feet first, leaping on them from the poop. He landed on two men, ran a third through the head, and vanished scrambling away into the darkness of the scuppers. Orwic came next. Almost before the Briton's feet touched deck Tros was up beside him and they two charged forward, bellowing:

"Lud of Lunden! Lud of Lunden!"

The Britons rallied to that cry until all the deck was clear, except of dead and dying, and there were only half a dozen Romans left to deal with, who had fought their way into the citadel and held it.

Tros left the Britons to attend to that. He looked for the crew, and found them at last, below-deck, hiding among water casks. He hauled them out of darkness one by one, cuffed them and drove them on deck. The bireme had worked under the lee of a low hill and was turning slowly in mid-current, drifting toward unimaginable mud banks over which the waves were gurgling as a river gurgles when it overflows the fields.

Tros left Conops at the helm and drove the crew forward, where he belabored them until they dropped the heavy anchor overside and the bireme came head to wind at last.

For a while he waited in the bow, watching to discover whether the anchor dragged or held; but there was nothing to judge by; he could see no land-marks, only gloom, and beyond it a long, deep shadow that was land.

The Britons were busy stripping Romans of their armor; he heard them drag the last one from the citadel; heard the splash as the body went overboard, then Orwic's voice:

"Nine-and-forty! Not bad! How many have we lost?"

There was a long pause, full of murmurings. Tros sat down on the bitts, rubbing bruises thoughtfully, feeling himself from head to foot, his spirits falling, falling as the minutes sped, and the count was not yet done. At last Orwic's voice again:

"Are you sure that's all? Seven-and-twenty dead. How many hurt?"

Again a long count, interspersed with argument as to whether or not a sword slash was an injury. Then an answer:

"Two-and-thirty."

"Almighty Zeus!" Tros murmured. "One-and-forty of a hundred fit to fight, and Cæsar waiting for me down the river! Cæsar with eight ships and about four hundred men! Cæsar with wind in his favor and dawn to see by! Cæsar and all Gaul to draw from! Hah!" he laughed, heaving himself to his feet, "but I'll con the channel seaward by the bones of ships! By Cæsar's grief, I'll find the way!"

No lights. He did not dare to show a light, not even in the hold among the water casks where they laid the wounded, with a few men who could crawl around to serve out water to them, binding wounds by the feel with thread-drawn linen that Caswallon's wife had sent aboard.

The dead they laid on the deck in one long row, face upward, and covered with the spare sail. Then Tros cast about for the strongest men and sent them to the benches, fifteen to each side.

There were scarce two hundred arrows left of all the thousands they had brought with them, and though they added to the number scores more that the Romans had shot into the woodwork, there were even then not more than ten or eleven excited Britons could use up in as many minutes.

Then a leak to plug, below the water-line, where one of the ships the bireme beaked had opened up a seam; thereafter, the scared and sulky seamen to be driven into the rigging to patch that, and to get the sail rebent where the wind had wrenched it from the spar.

Then gray dawn; sea-birds crying over wastes of marsh; gulls screaming where a corpse lay drifting in the mist; wind still in the north, but less of it; a great swell rolling up the estuary and lumping where it met the tide that had begun to flow down-river.

"Up anchor, Conops!"

Oars, and only thirty weary men to man them, the bireme beginning to feel the flowing tide, but prone to swing before the wind, and bucking on the lumpy water so that the oarsmen repeatedly missed stroke.

No drum for fear of warning Cæsar. Groans from the dark hold, as discouraging as the chilly daybreak, but a fog coming in on the wind in hurrying gray wisps, with patches of clear air between, for which Tros thanked the gods of Gaul.

"If only Cæsar sleeps."

The wish was father to that thought, as always. Tros's eyes were heavy. Every fiber of him ached from too much strain and no relief. His head swam and things multiplied themselves. He had to look three times to see a land-mark once. The wrecks of Cæsar's ships, glimpsed between scurrying drifts of gray, seemed never in the same place twice.

But minute by minute the tide flowed faster, the wind lessened and the fog increased. There was no sound but the surge of water, the muffled thump of oars, and the cry of sea-birds. Tros could sense a coming shift of wind, and he knew he had twice as much sea-room as the night before, because the tide was higher.

"All's well, master! We have given him the slip!" said Conops as the first wreck loomed in the fog for a moment and vanished astern.

He was heaving the lead from the poop, lest the sound of his voice should carry as he cried the changing depths.

But Tros knew Cæsar was the last man in the world to leave an outrage to the Roman dignity and eight vessels unavenged.

"Drum now!" he ordered. "I want every last tremble of speed!"

Speed now. Nothing else counted. If Cæsar was not in the neck of the channel waiting for him, all the warning in the world would reach the Romans too late. If he were there, nothing mattered but the impact.

There was only one way that Cæsar could prevent him from escaping. Somewhere, somehow he might have collected small boats and have moored them across the channel, using a stout cable anchored at both ends.

That was what Tros argued he would have done in Cæsar's place, with every available man who could be crowded into the boats, ready to jump aboard the bireme when she struck the cable.

"Faster! Faster!" he commanded, peering forward on the port side for a glimpse of wrecks, stamping his foot to set time for the drum.

"Zeus!" he exclaimed suddenly.

He swung his whole weight against the steering oar, as a shower of arrows and a dozen javelins twanged aboard out of the fog.

"Row, you Britons, row!"

There were boats alongside, crowded with men. Cæsar had outguessed him! Straight ahead, moored beam on to the channel, rolled two of the wrecks that had been floated in the night, and only Cæsar would have thought of that! Cæsar, and only Cæsar could have done it. Only in the nick of time Tros saw the movement as they wallowed in the swell, and knew they did not mark the channel but obstructed it. In another second he would have struck the mud bank to the right of them. Their decks were black with men, and as he swung the helm he caught one glimpse of Cæsar's scarlet cloak, on the left-hand ship. Then the mist, and a hail of arrows whistling through it.

"Row!" he ordered, his voice cracking with excitement.

For a marvel his eleven Britons had not fired an arrow. Orwic jumped to the port-side arrow-engine just as the bireme's beak struck Cæsar's floated wreck amidships and the crash threw every rower off his bench.

"Drum! Drum!" Tros thundered. "Back to your benches! Row! For Lud o' Lunden—row!"

He heard the cable break, and through the ghosting mist he saw one hulk go swinging toward the mud to starboard, a volley of arrows from her rattling into the bireme's bulwark, short by the length of the swing.

But Cæsar's hulk was on the ram, transfixed by it and sinking, holed under the bilge. Nine-tenths of the way was off the bireme. She was down by the head and refused to steer. The crowded boats were overtaking her. Unless the heave of the groundswell should shake off the wreck from her ram, the game was up!

"Orwic! Lay your arrow-engine forward! Cæsar is on that wreck ahead of us!"

But Cæsar was not. He was over the bireme's bows already like a god out of the opal morning in his scarlet cloak, alone, and beckoning to his men. Orwic fired point-blank at him, and missed with all twelve arrows. Before he could load again there were a dozen legionaries on the bow, shields locked and Cæsar in their midst.

"Row! Row!" Tros thundered.

He did not dare let go the helm. The pursuing boats were thumping through the mist and the air was whistling with arrows. But one of Cæsar's legionaries blew a trumpet blast. The arrows ceased. Then Cæsar's voice, calm, with a hint of laughter:

"Tros! I believe you know me. I advise you to surrender at discretion."

Tros swung the helm. He had a chance yet. Conops hurled his knife at Cæsar, but it clanged on a soldier's shield. Ten Britons clustered beside Orwic, crouching, forgetting bows and arrows, ready with their swords.

"Come on!" cried Orwic, and led them, all leaping from the poop and rushing forward past the citadel.

Marvel of all marvels, the thirty oarsmen never missed a stroke! The bireme was gaining headway, lurched, shook herself, buried her bow as a heavy wave passed under her stern, shook the wreck free from her ram and crushed it on the down plunge.

The shock of that sent the charging Britons staggering in a heap against the citadel, but the Romans, shoulder to shoulder with locked shields, contrived to keep their footing. Then the oars struck wreckage. An oar broke.

"Drum! Drum!" Tros thundered. "Slow beat! One—two! One—two! Stick to it, you Britons!"

Then, as they cleared the wreckage—

"Conops, take the helm!"

He drew his sword. A Roman hurled a javelin at him, but he dodged it. Orwic and his ten were out of sight beyond the citadel. Tros knew where they were by the eyes of the Romans, who were watching them, alert to repel the expected charge.

Cæsar seemed to be listening for the oar-beat of his own boats, but the wind, that had fallen calm, began to shift to westward, blowing the mist along in front of it. A sudden vista between hurrying fog banks revealed the fleet of small boats scattered hopelessly astern.

"Cæsar!" said Tros, laying his left hand on the arrow-engine. "I believe you know me. I advise you to surrender at discretion!"

Cæsar laughed. Less than a second later Tros knew why. Orwic chose that instant for the charge. He and his ten Britons leaped up on the bow and hurled themselves against the locked shields, with their own backs protecting Cæsar and his men from arrow-fire.

The Romans were past masters at that kind of fighting. The shields rose and fell almost leisurely, blocking attack, wearing down the adversary. Tros could see Cæsar's lips move as he spoke to his men in low tones, and though they stood the Britons off with shield and sword they made no effort to force them backward off the bow. Orwic's point slew one man, but the locked shields merely closed the gap.

"You are a bold rogue, Tros!" said Cæsar, in his pleasantest, amused voice that carried the effortless vibration learned in Rome's schools of oratory.

A Briton hurled a short spear at him, but he ducked it without taking his eyes off Tros.

"To-day, it would appear you have the best of it. To-morrow—who knows?"

Orwic pulled his men off. He knew no Latin, thought all this was talk about surrender. But the Britons were still in the way of the arrow-engine's fire. Tros whispered to Conops and signaled, trying to catch Orwic's eye but it was Cæsar who saw the signal. He made a superb gesture to Orwic, as if about to surrender to him. It deceived Tros for a moment, and it was to him, not to Orwic, that Cæsar spoke:

"I don't doubt, Tros, you are a man of discrimination, who will realize that Cæsar's ransom is worth more to you than Cæsar's dead body. Whereas you are worth nothing to me, dead or alive. And there is no one, Tros, whom I will crucify with less compunction when the proper time shall come!"

His eyes were on Tros, so he did not notice Conops signaling to Orwic. Orwic whispered to his men, but apparently Cæsar was unaware of that, too. He went on speaking:

"I advise you, Tros, to think of your predicament, since it is dangerous to be the enemy of Rome, fatal to be the foe of Cæsar! Neither Rome nor I forgive! Farewell!"

Almost without a gesture he turned and dived into the sea. The Britons sprang aside. Tros loosed a flight of arrows, but they clanged against raised shields, piercing them, sweeping down three legionaries.

Two followed Cæsar, plunging after him feet first, but their armor dragged them under. Orwic and his Britons slew the rest, hacking them down as they tried to re-form the broken line.

"Arrows! Arrows!" Tros roared, reloading the arrow-engine, watching the waves.

Cæsar's bald head, and the scarlet cloak behind it, appeared after a moment. Tros fired, but Cæsar ducked, and all twelve arrows missed.

Cæsar shook off the scarlet cloak and towed it, breasting the waves like a grampus, plunging into them and swimming under water when the Britons took pot shots at him, until he disappeared into the mist.*

There was too little sea room, too much fog and tide to turn the bireme and pursue him. His cold, amused laugh mocked Tros across unseen waves.

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* Cæsar was an extraordinarily strong swimmer, and a more than usually bold one, in spite of vicious self-indulgence that should have ruined the physique and nerve of any ordinary man. He often swam wide rivers, whose current was strong enough to hold up the engineers and their pontoons. The best known of his recorded swimming feats is the incident at Alexandria, where he was caught on the mole between forces advancing from either end. He escaped by jumping into a rough sea and swimming, dodging missiles and dragging his cloak after him, until picked up by a ship.

"By Lud of Lunden, that's a clever fellow who ought to have been born a Briton!" said Orwic, with the end of a cloth in his teeth as he was bandaging a sword slash in his arm.

"By Jupiter of Rome, he will become one by conquest!" Tros retorted savagely, hating himself, above all hating deathbed prophecies, that undermined a man's nerve, and created indecision.

Prophecy or not, he told himself the gods had delivered Cæsar into his hand. He, Tros, had failed them.

"Conops!" he roared. "The crew are skulking in the forehold. Rouse them with a rope's end! Make sail! Easy now, oars! The wind and tide serve."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BRITISH CHANNEL

The islands, the lands and the oceans are parts of the earth. The rivers are its veins. And even so, I tell you, races and peoples are parts of the Being of Man. Answer me then: should a finger destroy an arm for the sake of gain or pride or malice? Does the mountain hate the valley? Does the valley accuse the plain of enmity? And yet you fools make war on one another.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

ANOTHER westerly gale. The bireme plunged and rolled, not shipping much water, because Tros was at the helm, but swinging her fighting top like a pendulum. The working crew of British fishermen was miserably seasick.

Tros, amber eyes heavy with weariness, his great jaw grinding, shaking his head at intervals to throw the black hair from his eyes, steered a course far closer inshore than was necessary to make Thames-mouth; from the mouth of the Seine he might have stood nearly due east toward the Belgian sands in order to take full advantage of wind and tide.

Orwic was still wearing his Roman costume, but his moustache spoiled the effect and so did the fair hair that fell to his shoulders. He swung himself up from the hold and climbed the poop by the broken ladder. For a minute or two he leaned overside and vomited, then worked his way hand-over-hand along the rail toward Tros and pointed at the coast of Britain, where the chalk cliffs stood like ghosts in a gray mystery of drifting fog.

"Too close," he objected. "A Roman ship—we look like Romans. If we put in there, they'll"—he leaned overside, but managed to control himself—"remember the Northmen," he went on. "Two longships—ran from us toward Pevensey. They'll have burned some villages. The next foreign-looking ship that runs for shelter will—"

He vomited again, clinging to the lee rail. Tros waited for him to recover and then gestured toward the opposite coast of Gaul, invisible beyond a howling great waste of gray sea.

"I would run in for the sake of the wounded; this cold wind tortures them. Better a fight with Britons than another brush with Cæsar," he said grimly. "Cæsar has had time to reach Cantia by chariot and put a dozen ships into the water. He has had time to set a dozen traps. He'll risk storm and everything to catch and crucify us. Twenty of us fit to fight—crew no good—torn sail—and who is to man the oars?"

"But if you hug the shore our own Britons may put out and throw fire into us," said Orwic. "That's what we always try to do with the Northmen."

"Not in this gale," Tros answered. "Of two foes, shun the stronger. Cæsar is the craftiest of Romans. We have stung him, Orwic. We have made a mock of him before his own men. We have tricked a prisoner out of his camp by forgery and boldness. We have made him run; he had to swim for it. And I know Cæsar!"

"A pity we didn't catch him."

"Aye, I am ashamed," Tros ground his teeth. "And what shall I say to Caswallon, who lent me a hundred gentlemen to take Cæsar alive! Half of them dead or wounded—no plunder—nothing to show him but my father's corpse, for which I must beg obsequies."

"Caswallon will remember who wrecked Cæsar's ships off Kent a while ago. You saved Britain for us, Tros. Caswallon will not forget that."

But Tros smiled sourly. "It is only grudges that endure. Kings' memories are as short as Cæsar's for a friendship."

Orwic, too weak to argue, lay down near the lee rail, hugging himself in his cloak. He relished no more than Tros did the prospect of slinking up Thames with nothing to show but a foreigner's corpse to offset more than sixty dead and wounded gentlemen.

Mere seamen would hardly have mattered; but by the irony of fate not one of the twenty hirelings had suffered a scratch, except when Tros and Conops hit them with belaying pins or knife-hilts to stir their energy. In a sense Orwic was as much responsible as Tros; it was he who had supported Tros first and last; he was second-in-command of the expedition. Worse! The Lunden girls had seen the bireme off; they would be waiting now to kiss victorious warriors—expecting to see Cæsar brought forth from the hold in chains.

Instead of Cæsar in his scarlet cloak they would see dead and wounded friends—relations—lovers.

Orwic was as young and imaginative as the girls who reckoned him the bravest man in Britain.

Tros gave the helm to Conops, who looked comical in an imitation Roman tunic, with his red Greek seaman's cap pulled low over his brow, an impudent nose beneath it, and a slit lip that showed one eye-tooth like a dog's.

Conops was merely curious to know what was to happen next; he had perfect confidence in Tros's ability to meet it.

"Keep the wind at the back of your right ear," Tros commanded. "The tide'll be slack in an hour; watch for the surf on the quicksands on your starboard bow. Keep clear of that, and follow the tide around the coast when it starts to make. If there's any trouble with the crew, wake me."

He went below, into the cabin where his father's body lay, with Cæsar's scarlet cloak spread over it. And for a while he stood steadying himself with one hand on an overhead beam, watching the old man's face, that was as calm as if Cæsar's tortures had never racked the seventy-year-old limbs, the firm, proud lip showing plainly through the white beard, the eyes closed as in sleep, the aristocratic hands folded on the breast.

It was dark in there and easy to imagine things. The body moved a trifle in time to the ship's swaying.

"Sleep on," Tros muttered.

He could not imagine his father dead, not even with the corpse before his eyes. No sentiment, not much emotion, had been lost between them. He actually loved his father more that minute than he had ever done. Perseus had had scant respect for the claims of human personality.

He had died not cursing and not blessing Cæsar, utterly indifferent to Cæsar's crimes provided his own acts should pass the critical judgment of his own conscience. Tros on the other hand ached for revenge. He was determined to have it.

He could not have explained why. He had inherited his father's passion for free will and full responsibility, each man for his own acts. He did not question his father's right to submit to torture rather than reveal to Cæsar the least hint of what the secrets of the Samothracian and Druidic Mysteries really were; he would have done the same himself.

Nor did he question his father's right to be unvindictive; he was rather proud of the old man's conquest over self to the point where he could suffer torture and not shriek for vengeance. He was immensely proud to be the old man's son.

Yet love him, in any ordinary sense, he knew he never had done; and, strangely enough, he hardly hated Cæsar. He was the enemy of Cæsar; he despised his vices and admired his genius, loathed his cruelty and liked his gentlemanly wit.

He lay down and slept. His dreams were all of Cæsar, Cæsar standing on the bireme's bow in the mist at Seine-mouth, laughing, charmingly sarcastic, promising to crucify him by and by, plunging beneath a flight of arrows into the waves and continuing to laugh out of a fog-bank while the bireme pitched over the shoals at river-mouth and left Cæsar swimming safely out of reach.

He did not sleep long. He heard Conops shout from the poop and sprang out of the cabin, sword in hand ready to deal with mutiny. But there was no mutiny. Conops and a dozen Britons were staring at a Gaulish fishing boat not far astern that looked as if it had been rebuilt by Roman engineers; it was plunging in masses of spray toward the British coast, making for Hythe in all likelihood.

"Romans, or I'll eat my knife-hilt!" Conops sneered. "Put about, master, and let's ram them. Did you ever see such land-lubbers! Can't even quarter the sea. Straight from point to point like a plowshare into a field of turnips! There—they swamp!"

But the boat was decked, and the deck must have been strong and watertight. She rose out of a welter of gray sea, dismasted but right side up, and Tros could see men, who certainly were Romans, chopping at the rigging with their short swords.

"Go about and ram them," Conops urged again, and Tros considered that for a minute. But he would likely enough lose his own sail if he tried to turn in that wind.

"They'll smash on the rocks when the tide carries them inshore," he prophesied and went below again to make up arrears of sleep.

He did not wake again until nightfall, when he relieved Conops at the helm. By that time the tide had carried them well out into the North Sea. The wind backed suddenly to the northwest, increasing in strength, and he had to heave to.

There were no stars visible, no moon, nothing to do but pace the poop to keep warm, judging the drift by the feel of the wind, with the cries of the wounded and the thought of that Gaulish-Roman fishing boat with her Roman crew, to haunt and worry him.

He tried to persuade himself that the boat could not be Cæsar's. But calculations, made and checked a dozen times, assured him that Cæsar would have had time to reach Caritia by chariot from Seinemouth and to send that boat in the teeth of the gale across the channel; in fact, he would have had about two hours to spare, which was ample in which to choose and instruct men for his purpose, whatever that might be.

Black night on a raging sea was neither time nor place for shrewd guessing at Cæsar's newest strategy, but Tros did not doubt it would run true to form and be brilliant if nothing else. To land a dozen Romans openly on the shore of Briton would be madness; if they were not killed instantly they would be held as hostages. Direct overtures to Caswallon would be laughed at—Cæsar would not try any such foolishness as to send messengers to Lunden. What then?

Cæsar's notorious luck would probably throw up his men all living on the beach, or might even cause the mastless boat to drift into a sheltered cove. What then? What then?

Even supposing that boat should have been lost with all hands, the fact remained that Cæsar was attempting something. He would persist. He would send another boat. For what purpose? To avenge himself on Tros undoubtedly, but how?

Cæsar played politics like a game, staking kingdom against kingdom. Incredibly daring and swift decisions were the secret of his campaigns; but there was something else, and as Tros paced the poop, wet to the skin with spray, he tried to analyze what he knew of Cæsar, knowing he must outguess him if he hoped to escape the long reach of his arm.

He tried for a while to imagine himself in Cæsar's place; but that was difficult; the very breath Tros breathed was the antithesis of Cæsar's. Cæsar yearned to impose the Roman yoke on all the world; Tros burned to see a world of free men, in which each man ruled himself and minded his own business.

It was that thought, presently, that gave him what he thought might be the key. Well-bred, vain, self-seeking rascal though Cæsar was, there was something splendid in his method, something admirable in his constancy of purpose and in his ability to make men serve him in the teeth of suffering and death. What was it? In what way was Cæsar different from other men?

His vices were unspeakable; his treachery was a byword; his extravagance was an insult to the men who died for him and to the nations from whom he extorted money with which to bribe Rome's politicians. He had personal charm, but that was not enough; men grow weary of a rogue, however successful and however personally charming. There was some other secret.

And at last it seemed to Tros he had it. Rome! The glamour of the word Rome. The idea of Rome as mistress of the world, with all men paying tribute to her—one law, one senate, one arbiter of quarrels, one fountain-head of authority. A sort of imitation of Nature, with the fundamental truth of brotherhood and freedom left out! Cæsar served his own ends, but he served Rome first; he might loot Rome and make himself her despot, but he would leave her mistress of the world.

No other people, possibly no other man than Cæsar had that obsession fixed so thoroughly in mind that he himself was almost the idea. Foreigners might send their spies to Rome and bribe her public men almost openly, but none could set Roman against Roman when Rome's profit was in question. On the other hand, Rome sent spies, or openly acknowledged agents, and successfully set tribe against tribe, faction against faction, until domestic strife ensued, and Rome stepped in and conquered.

The Britons, for instance, were divided into petty kingdoms, jealous of their own kings. Caswallon, when he defeated Cæsar and sent him sneaking back to Gaul by night, had been at his wits' end to raise an army, even for that purpose. The half of one British tribe, the Atrebates, lived in Gaul and had accepted Cæsar's rule, under a king of Cæsar's making.

The Iceni traded horses to the men of Kent, but fought them between-times; and as far as the other British tribes were concerned, they were to all intents and purposes foreigners, loosely united by occasional marriages but with no real bond other than Druidism.

The druids taught brotherhood, it was true; but that was too easily interpreted to mean friendship toward foreigners and strife at home.

The only enemies the Britons really held in common were the Northmen, who plundered the coasts whenever their own harvests failed or their own young men grew restless to wed foreign wives. But the Britons made friends with the Northmen, intermarried with them, let prisoners settle in their midst, and absorbed them, without making them feel they were a part of one united nation.

Self-seeking rogue though he was, then, Cæsar was Rome, to all intents and purposes; or so Tros argued it. Cæsar, driven out of Britain, being Cæsar, would never rest until he had reversed defeat.

Therefore, that boat, undoubtedly containing Romans, must be a move in Cæsar's game, a move that would mean nothing else but an attempt to set Britons against Britons, since that was all a handful of men could do in an enemy country.

But Cæsar never neglected himself or his own feuds while he spread Rome's power abroad. He never failed to follow up his threats; never neglected to avenge a personal defeat. He was not only Rome, he was Cæsar.

Tros had laughed at him, had tricked a prisoner away, had fooled him, outguessed him, drowned a hundred men and almost caught Cæsar himself. It was safe, then, to wager that, coming so swiftly after that encounter, the gale-swept Gaulish fishing boat in some way was connected with revenge on Tros. Successful guile delighted Cæsar even more than winning battles.

It was not unreasonable to suppose that Cæsar had sent messengers in that boat—no doubt with expensive presents—to tell tales that should reach Caswallon's ears.

As he turned that over in his mind Tros almost decided to run for the Belgian lowlands and seek refuge there. He did not doubt he could make good friends among the Belgæ. Pride restrained him. He had made a promise to Caswallon; he would keep it. Those young gallants who had sailed with him—mutinous cockerels—had their rights; their dead should be buried in British earth.

But he almost wished the gods might relieve him of responsibility by sinking the bireme in that raging sea. He was almost willing to drown just then, provided he might go down handsomely.

Orwic seemed to sense his mood. He threw off the seasickness and yelled in Tros's ear;

"Lud of Lunden is a good god. He will send us an achievement."

"Achievement," Tros muttered. "And thirty seasick men to wrest it from destiny!"

For the first time in his life he had begun to think that destiny might be his enemy and not his friend; that Cæsar, the Romans, Rome, might be fortune's favorites and he and his friends, the Britons, nothing but grist in the eternal mill.

The wind shrieked through the rigging; bitter cold spray drenched him. He had to cling to the rail. His eyes ached, staring at stark, dark seas that pitched the bireme like a cork.

"I will die free. I will set others free. I must! I burn to live! But is it all worth the burning?" he wondered.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NORTHMEN!

So ye seek peace? Shall ye find it quarreling with one another?
FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

ANOTHER day and another night of plunging in a confusing sea, hove-to half the time, cheating wind and tide by miracles of seamanship, found Tros wide-eyed at the helm and the bireme's bow headed at last into the hump-backed waves that guarded the Thames estuary.

There was no land in sight, but there were sea-birds and a hundred other signs that gave Tros the direction; he had run in the dark before a blustering wind, had caught the tide under him at dawn and was making the most of it, sure he was in midstream and as confident as a homing pigeon of his exact position, well along into the Thames.

It was cold, and the wind bore rain with it that drenched the autumn air and settled into banks of blowing mist through which the watery sun appeared over the stern like dim, discouraged lanternlight. The wind howled through the rigging and the sea swished through the remnants of basketwork that survived on the bireme's ends. The great ungainly ram sploshed in the steep waves like a harpooned monster, and now and then the Britons, down in the hold, screamed from the torture of ill-tended wounds.

Conops relieved Tros at the helm, nodding when told to keep in mid-tide and to watch for land on the starboard bow. There was a Briton at the masthead who was afraid of the souls of the dead gentlemen on deck; and nobody, least of all himself, had any confidence in him. Tros went forward, to lean over the bow and think.

He could not throw off despondency. He began to wonder whether his father had not been right in saying that a man's delight in action was no better than the animals', that his brain was only a mass of instincts magnified, and that the soul was the only part of him worth cultivating.

There lay his father, dead, contented to be dead, with no man's injury to his discredit. He had died without regret for unattained ambition, since he had none of the ordinary sort. With all the resources of the Mysteries of Samothrace to count on, he had never owned a house; even the stout ship, that Cæsar had ordered burned for the copper she contained, had hardly been his property, though he had built her and commanded her; he had regarded her as a gift to the Lords of Samothrace, at whose behest she had sailed uncharted seas.

But the father had never ached for action as the son did. Tros had the same compelling impulse to uphold the weak and to defy the strong, but he had a more material way of doing it. He could not see the sense of talking, when a blow, well aimed, might break a tyrant's head. Nor was he totally opposed to tyrants; an alert and generously guided tyranny appealed to him as something the world needed; a tyranny that should insist, with force, on freedom.

"Is there anything more tyrannous than truth?" he wondered, watching the waves yield and reappear over the ironshod ram.

Even his father had had to admit that a ship, for instance, could not be managed without despotism. There had never lived a sterner ship's commander than old Perseus; just though he had been, and self-controlled, he was a captain who would brook no hesitation in obeying orders. Yet his father had failed, if the loss of his ship at Cæsar's hands, followed by torture and death, were failure.

Not even the druids of Gaul, for whose encouragement his father had set forth from Samothrace, had gained in the least, as far as Tros could see; and if that was not failure, what was it? Yet his father had seemed quite contented with the outcome, had died appearing to believe his failure was success.

Had he, Tros, not the same right to believe this comparative failure against Cæsar was good fortune in disguise? It was only comparative failure after all. Cæsar had had the worst of it, twice. He had wrecked the greater part of Cæsar's fleet. He had thoroughly worsted Cæsar in the fight at Seine-mouth. His father had never done anything as effective as that.

Was his father's attitude the right one? Or was his? Or were they both wrong?

Why, for instance, had his father taught him swordsmanship, if fighting was an insult to the soul, as he contended? Must a man learn how to do things, and then restrain himself from doing them? If so, why do anything? Why preach? Why eat and drink? Why live? What was the use of knowing how to sail a ship, if action was discreditable? Was war against the elements so different from war with men? Should he have let the sea win and have drowned, too proud to fight?

He thought not. He remembered how his father used to fight the elements; there had been no bolder man in the world. What then? Ought all men to be seamen and spend life defeating wind and tide? The mere suggestion was ridiculous. Nine men out of ten were as utterly incapable of seamanship as they were of penetrating the Inner Mysteries and living such a life as Perseus led. Besides, if all did one thing, who should do the other things that needed doing?

Slowly, very slowly, as he leaned over the bow and watched the changing color of the estuary water, Tros began to solve the riddle —of the universe, it seemed to him.

"A man is not a man until he feels the manhood in him," he reflected. "Then he does what he can do."

That seemed to be the whole of it. Each to his own profession, born leaders in the van, born blacksmiths to the anvil, born adventurers toward the skyline—he for one!—and each man fighting to a finish with whatever enemy opposed him, that enemy on every battlefield himself, no other!

Good! Tros stiffened his huge muscles and his leonine eyes began to gleam under his shaggy brows. There was dignity in that warfare, purpose and plan sufficient, if one should rule himself so manfully in every chance-met circumstance that victory were his, within himself, no matter what the outcome!

And now he remembered Perseus' dying speech, and how the old man had forbidden nothing, not even the sword, but had prophesied for Tros a life of wandering and many another brush with Cæsar. He and Cæsar were to help each other some day!

"Gods! What a prospect!"

Cæsar stood for all that Tros loathed: Interference with men's liberties, imposition of a foreign yoke by trickery and force of arms, robbery under the cloak of law, vice and violence, lies gilded and painted to resemble truth. And he was to help Cæsar! Some day!

He laughed. Yet he believed in deathbed prophecies. The thought encouraged him.

"If I am to help Cæsar, and he me, then my time to die is not yet. For I will injure him with all my might and main until my whole mind changes!"

He reflected that it takes time for a man's inclination to change to that extent.

"My will is not the wind," he muttered. "I will live long before I befriend Cæsar."

The wind changed while he thought of it, veering to the southward, blowing all the mist toward the northern riverbank until at last the sun shone on a strip of dark-green where the forest touched the tide-mud and Conops cried, "Land-ho!" from the poop.

Swiftly then, that being Britain and the autumn, magic went to work on land-and-sea-scape that changed until both wide-flung riverbanks gleamed in sunlight and the heaving estuary-bosom frilled itself with ripples in place of white-caps on the surface of the waves.

Gray water brightened to steel-blue, stained with brown mud where the tide poured over the shoals, and the sea-gulls came offshore in thousands to pounce on mussel-beds before the tide should cover them.

Then another hail from Conops, and Tros returned to the poop, his mood changing with the weather. He was already whistling to himself.

"Yonder!" said Conops, his one eye staring up-river. "Too much smoke!"

"Mist," remarked Orwic, but the wish was father to the contradiction.

He had seen that kind of smoke before; had more than one scar to show for it. One did not admit, until sure, that Northmen might be raiding British homesteads.

"Smoke," Tros announced after a minute. He could almost smell it. "Orwic! Caswallon shall welcome us after all!"

Orwic shouted. A dozen Britons came out of the hold, to cluster on the poop and stare at the smudge on the skyline.

"Northmen!" announced one of them, with an air of being able to read smoke on the skyline as if it were Celtic script. "Those two longships Tros refused to fight the other day have found their way up-Thames. It's Tros's fault. They have stolen a march while we plucked his oat-cake out of Cæsar's fire! By Lud of Lunden, we were fools to trust a foreigner!"

"Aye, and Lunden burning!" said another.

But that was nonsense; the smoke was much nearer than Lunden.

"Two longships and only thirty of us fit to fight!"

"Tros will want to run away again!" a third suggested.

Conops bared his teeth and Orwic, who had led the earlier mutiny to his own distress, made signals; but they deferred no more to Orwic than to Tros. Orwic was only Caswallon's nephew; they were as good as he, and equally entitled to opinions. Besides, as second-in-command, Orwic was responsible along with Tros for failure to capture Cæsar, and that, added to jealousy, was excuse enough for ignoring his signals.

"Any man can sail a ship up-river," one of them suggested brazenly.

Tros almost brayed astonishment. He had thought he had tamed those cockerels. Cold, seasickness and battle on the deck had reduced the hired crew to the condition of whipped dogs, but these young aristocrats appeared to recover their nerve the moment they smelt a Northman.

It had not yet filtered into Tros's understanding how warfare with the men from over the North Sea was a heritage, almost a privilege, a sport, in which serfs were the prizes and women the side bets. To mention Northmen near the coast of Britain was like talking wolf to well-trained hounds.

"Caswallon gave the command of this ship to Tros," said Orwic, standing loyally by his appointed chief.

Whereat they laughed. They were in their own home waters; not Caswallon himself might overrule their free wills! Each man thrilled to one and the same impulse. Some of the wounded crawled on deck and, learning what the commotion was about, cried out to Tros to get after the Northmen instantly, hoof, hair and teeth!

"I, too, am minded to make the acquaintance of these Northmen," Tros remarked, and they grinned, although they did not quite believe him; from what they already knew of him, he was too cautious and conservative to lead them into the kind of fight they craved.

"We will introduce you," a youngster answered. "We will show you what fighting is!"

"You!" Tros answered; and they all backed forward along the poop because his sword was drawn, although none saw it whip out of the sheath. With his left hand he picked up a Roman shield.

"Orwic! Stand by!"

The other Britons began to jeer at Orwic, although they chose their words, for there was none but Tros who had ever beaten him on horse or foot.

"Silence!" Tros thundered, tapping with his sword-point on the deck.

One or two laughed, but rather feebly, and they all grew still before the rapping ceased, most of them clutching at their daggers, glancing at one another sidewise.

"Must I teach you young cockerels another lesson? Lud of Lunden! How many arrows have you? Not a hundred! You squandered arrows against Cæsar by the basketful. Do you think Northmen will stand still to have their throats cut? Idiots!"

"We know how to fight Northmen," one man piped up. "We'll show you!"

"You? Show me?" Tros thundered.

He took a long stride forward and they backed away, uncomfortably close now to the poop edge; there was no rail there to lean against.

"By Lud, I'll beat the brains out of the first who speaks again without my leave!" He meant it, and they knew it. "Who has anything to say?"

His sword-blade flickered like a serpent's tongue; he seemed able to meet all eyes simultaneously.

"Who speaks?" he repeated; but none answered him.

They could back away no farther; to advance meant instant death to two or three at any rate, and whether or not Orwic should take Tros's side.

"At your hands I have suffered failure," Tros went on. "It carks in me. I went for Cæsar. I bring back dead and wounded men. Whose fault is that? Yours, you disobedient young devils! By the gods who grinned when you wasted arrows, it shall be my fault if I fail again! Now hear me! Not a man aboard this bireme shall see Lunden until we beat the Northmen first! Who questions that?"

He paused dramatically, but there was no answer. He had stolen their thunder by threatening to do what they had first proposed, like yielding to a wrestler's hold in order to upset him.

"Less than a hundred arrows! Not one throwing-spear! A torn sail! Two-score swordsmen fit to stand up! You have nothing but me to depend on! Eat that! Any one question it?"

"You can handle the ship," said one of them.

He seemed afraid to hear his own voice.

"Can I?" Tros's voice rang with irony. "Does any of you question that I will?"

"Come! No ill-temper, Tros. Nobody doubts your seamanship," another man piped up. "We have had proof enough of that."

"Not proof enough! Nay, by Lud of Lunden, not yet enough!

Seamanship includes the art of choking mutiny! Who doubts that I command this ship and every Briton in her? Speak up! Who doubts it? I will abolish doubt!"

"Caswallon gave you the command. That is all right," said one of them. "Only lead us against the Northmen, that is all."

"Lead? I will drive you!" Tros retorted. "Stand out, the man who thinks I can't. Come on and let's settle the question. What? Haven't I a rival? Down off my poop then! Down you go!"

He strode after them, point-first, and they scrambled off the poop in laughter at their own defeat. So Tros saw fit to smile too, as they crowded in the waist to hear the rest of what he had to say.

"Northmen," he laughed, pecking at the planking with his sword-point. "I will give you such a bellyful of Northmen as you never dreamed. To your benches now! Out oars!"

And they obeyed. They had promised they would row when called on. They had disobeyed him more than once, and it was true that they had squandered ammunition contrary to orders—true that, unless he could think of some expedient, they would be helpless against the two or three hundred men the Northmen probably could muster.

But they also obeyed because it dawned on them that Tros was sick at heart from having lost so many men without a victory to show for it, and that he was bent on snatching a revenge from destiny.

Thirteen oars aside began to thump in unison, not adding much to the bireme's speed, but adding a great deal to the unanimity; and presently Tros added twenty more, compelling the hired seamen to man the empty benches, taking the helm himself. The wind was falling; the sail flapped half of the time, but the tide served and with forty-six oars the headway was good enough.

He did not want to move too fast. He had never fought Northmen, although Caswallon and Orwic had told him of their methods—how they usually landed from two ships on two sides of a village and fought their way toward each other, burning as they went, to create a panic.

And he knew the British method of opposing them, by throwing fire into their ships if they could come alongside, and by cutting down trees in the forest for a rampart against them when they landed and advanced on foot.

The hundred young men he had taken with him on his venture against Cæsar constituted practically the whole of Caswallon's available fighting force in any sudden emergency. Excepting Lunden, which was only a little place, there were no towns from which to draw levies at a moment's notice; British settlements were scattered and Britons disinclined to obey their chief unless they saw good and sufficient reason for it, so it would take time to summon an army and Caswallon was probably in desperate straits.

It was late in the year for Northman raids, but if these were the two ships that Tros had refused to fight in the channel on his way to attack Cæsar they might be on one of their usual plundering expeditions; in which case they would be in force and with their line of retreat extremely alertly guarded. Thirty men would be next to useless as an independent force against them and the only hope would be to reach Caswallon somehow and support him.

But it might be that the Northmen's home harvests had failed and they were up to their old game of wintering in Britain, doing all the damage within reach in order to force an armistice and contributions of supplies. In that event they would not be considering retreat, their ships might be unguarded and it might be possible to come on them unawares.

It seemed to Tros, and Orwic confirmed the opinion, that the smoke came from both sides of the river. The man at the masthead was equally sure of it, and those were his home waters; he knew every contour of the Thames.

That might mean that the Northmen were divided, one ship's crew plundering on either bank; which was likely enough, since it would be good strategy, obliging Caswallon to divide his own forces and making it more difficult for him to gather men into one manageable unit. The Britons were probably in scattered tens and dozens being beaten in detail for lack of one directing mind.

"A man does what he can," Tros reflected, glancing upward at the heavy fighting top that might be visible from a long way off up-river.

He called the man down from the masthead, then turned to Orwic.

"You and Conops take axes. Cut the shrouds on the port side. Then chop the mast down!"

He called the hired seamen away from the oars, lowered and stowed the sail, set ten of them hauling on the starboard shrouds and gave the word to Orwic. Three dozen ax-strokes and the mast went over with a crash, increasing the damage to the bulwark done by Cæsar's grapnels. Swiftly they chopped away the starboard rigging and Tros sent the seamen below to their oars again.

"And now," said Orwic, "I obeyed you, and I don't know why. Without a sail how can we attack two swift ships?"

Tros was not fond of explanations; they are usually bad for discipline; but he conceded something to Orwic's prompt obedience, which was a novelty to be encouraged.

"We should have lost the wind around the next bend anyhow. I would have had to take men from the oars to man sheets and braces. The Northmen are faster; we couldn't have run, sail or no sail. Gather all the arrows into one basket, set them by the starboard arrow-engine, and listen to me. I'll kill you if you loose one flight before I give the word!"

He did not dare to use the bull-hide drum to set time for the rowing, for the sound of drum carries farther over water than the thump of oars between the thole-pins; he had to rely on gestures and his voice.

The bireme was in mid-tide, gliding up-river rapidly; the shore was narrowing in on either hand, with shoal-water projecting nearly into midstream at frequent intervals. The smoke of two burning villages, a dozen miles apart and one on either side of the river, was already diminishing from brown to gray and the nearest—not two miles up-river—appeared of the two to be the more burnt out. Tros began to whistle to himself.

Between the bireme and the nearest smoke there was a belt of trees that crept down to the river's edge on the starboard hand. The trees were lower nearer the water, but even so, now that the mast was gone, they formed an effective screen behind which he could approach without giving warning because the deep-water channel followed the bank closely.

"Orwic," he said quietly, "your Lud of Lunden is a good god, and the Northmen are on both sides of the river. Listen!"

A horn-blast and then another rang through the woods on the starboard hand. They were answered by two more, from not far away.

"Are those British signals?"

"No," said Orwic.

"The tide will serve us for an hour. How many arrows have we?"

"Ninety."

"Save them!"

Away in the distance, from across the river, came the faint sound of several horns blowing simultaneously.

"Britons?" asked Tros.

"Northmen."

Tros laughed.

"Caswallon has them checked, I take it. They are summoning their friends."

He sent Conops to stand below the poop and signal to the oarsmen to dip slowly, quietly. He only needed steerage-way; the tide was carrying the bireme fast enough, perhaps too fast. There was nothing but guess-work until they should pass that belt of trees.

The shoal mud formed an island nearly in mid-river, half submerged, and between that and the land the tide poured in a surging brown stream. There was no room to maneuver, hardly room to have swung a longship with the aid of anchors. A little higher up, beyond the belt of trees, the mud bank vanished under water, and there was room enough there for a dozen ships to swing; deep enough water almost from bank to bank the full width of the river. Tros tried to form a mental picture of the riverbank at that point. but he had seen it only once before as he passed it on the outward journey.

"Is there a creek beyond those trees?" he asked Orwic.

Orwic asked the man who had been at the masthead.

"Yes, a narrow creek. Fairly deep water."

Another horn-blast echoed through the trees. It seemed to come from close to the riverbank and was answered instantly. Like the echo to that, from away up-river came a chorus of six horns blown in unison. There began loud shouting from somewhere just beyond the trees and, presently, the unmistakable thump and rattle of oars being laid in rowlocks. A moment later Tros's ear caught the steady, short stroke of deep-sea rowing, such as men use where the waves are steep and close together.

"Now!" he shouted. "Give way!"

There was nothing for it now but speed. If he had the Northmen trapped they were at his mercy; if he had guessed wrong, then the bireme was at theirs. He beat the bull-hide drum and bellowed to his rowers:

"One! Two! One! Two! One! Two!"

Shouts responded from around the tree-clad corner of the bank, shouts and a mighty splashing as a helmsman tried to swing a longship in a hurry out of the creek-mouth bow-first to the tide, backing the port oars.

"Row, you Britons! Row!" Tros thundered, taking the helm from Conops.

He could hear the water boiling off the bireme's ram. In his mind's eye he could see the Northmen's whole predicament, with no room to maneuver and a strong tide hitting them beam-on as they left the creek-mouth. He could hear their captain bellowing, heard the oar-beat change and knew the longship was attempting, too late, to turn upstream and run from the unseen enemy.

And it turned out better than he hoped. As the bireme's bow raced past the belt of trees the longship lay with her nose toward the midstream mud-bank, starboard oars ahead and port oars backing frantically, blue mud boiling all around her and panic on deck as a dozen men struggled to hoist the sail to help her swing. She was less than a hundred yards away. Tros could have sunk her, with that tide under him, without troubling the oars at all.

He beaked her stark amidships. As the Northmen loosed one wild volley of arrows, the iron-shod ram crashed in under the bilge and rolled her over, ripping out fifty feet of planking from her side. The shock of the collision threw the rowers from the benches, and the bireme swung on the tide with her stern-post not a dozen feet away from the edge of the midstream shoal, then drifted upstream with wreckage trailing from her bow and the wounded crying that she leaked in every seam.

Tros sent Conops below to discover what the damage really amounted to and watched the Northmen. Their longship had gone under sidewise, so that not even her mast was visible. Most of her men were drowning; some had struggled to the mud-bank, where the yielding mud sucked them under. Others, trying to make the creek-mouth, were being carried upstream by the tide; not many were swimming strongly enough to have any prospect of reaching shore. And as if they had been hiding in fox-holes, Britons began appearing from between the trees gathering in excited groups to cut down the survivors.

"The collision opened up her seams. I doubt she'll float as far as Lunden," Conops announced.

"How much water has she made yet?"

"Half a cubit, master."

"Orwic, take some of the wounded and man the water-hoist!"

So they rigged the trough amidships, and the beam with a bucket at either end that was the Roman ship designers' concept of a pump.* Tros swung the bireme's head upstream and began to consider that other smudge of brown smoke, half-a-dozen or more miles away.

"Now, if Lud of Lunden really is a good god," he remarked to Orwic, "we will catch another longship on our ugly snout without wasting a single arrow!"

"We might pray to Lud," Orwic suggested.

"No," said Tros. "The gods despise a man who prays. They help men who make use of opportunity. Get below there!"

The oarsmen were all leaning overside to watch the Northmen being cut down by Britons as they struggled through the muddy shallows close by the riverbank.

"Man the benches! Out oars! I'll show you a fight to suit you between here and Lunden Town!"

CHAPTER XXIX

BATTLE!

Spirit of Earth and Sky and Sea, forbid that I should feel no pity for the blind and deaf! Toward ignorance may my patience be as gentle as the dew on thirsty earth—aye, and as time that permitteth newness. But ye are not blind; ye can see your desires. Ye are not deaf; ye can hear the tempter. Ye are not ignorant; times beyond number I have given freely all the wisdom I have learned, and then have sought more that I might share it with you.

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* It looked something like a modern "walking-beam." A man stood at each end, who tipped the water out of the buckets into the trough that carried it overside.

What then shall I say to wantons who rebel in the name of liberty against their captains in an hour of peril, that they may enslave themselves to lusts that chain their souls to worse indignities, and force them to worse treacheries than any tyrant?

What can a tyrant do but slay? And what is death but freedom?

If ye seek freedom to betray and to debauch your manhood, lo, ye have it. And then what? Death shall set you free indeed from the reins of Wisdom. But when ye return to the earth for future lives shall Wisdom be yours for the asking? Or shall ye begin again at your beginnings and earn in sorrow little by little again the Wisdom that was yours but ye would not use?

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

It was a desperate, dinning fight that raged to the south of the river and a few miles south of Lunden. The tide slackened and began to change; the bireme made slow progress; it was a long time before Tros made out the mast of another longship between the trees ahead of him. But long before that he could hear and see trees falling, as the Britons felled them in the Northmen's path. Orwic kept up a running comment:

"That's a good joke. They have burned Borsten's village; his father was a Northman! They'll have thought to scare Caswallon and force terms from him. Threats only make him fight. Did you see that tree fall? That's by Borsten's Brook. Caswallon has whipped a force together in the nick of time. He has them cut off from the river. There! another tree. They're ringing them around! Land us yonder, Tros; I know a short cut to where Caswallon stands praying to the gods for thirty extra men!"

"No," Tros answered, with a jaw-snap that conveyed conviction.

Tros's eyes were on that longship. He lusted to possess it. It lay bow out of water on the mud, with a kedge in midstream with which to haul off in a hurry in case of need. In all his wanderings he had never seen a ship with such sweet lines; she was almost the ship of his dreams—not big enough, but there were only three men guarding her and she would do for a beginning! One of the three men blew a horn-blast as he sighted the dismasted bireme. Tros's laugh was like an answering trumpet-call; he knew that ship was his if only he could manage his excited Britons.

It was easy enough to read what had happened: A raiding party of Northmen caught ashore by the Britons and cut off from their ship; the men left to guard the ship summoned by horn to the rescue, only to find themselves in the same trap.

"The Britons will burn that ship, Lud rot them, unless I prevent," Tros muttered.

But he was hard put to it to keep his own Britons rowing; they wanted to ram the riverbank and leap ashore to help block the Northmen's retreat. Half of them at a time, and sometimes all of them, left the oars to lean over the bulwark and instruct Tros how to steer for the bank; it was only when they saw the bireme drifting backward down the river that they returned to the oars reluctantly.

There began to be downright mutiny again; one man threw a lump of wood that missed Tros by a hair's breadth; the wounded crawled on deck and cursed him for a coward alien. He thundered on the drum for silence, gesturing to Conops at the helm to hold the bireme in mid-river.

"You young fools!" he roared. "If you take their ship away, what have they left to retreat to?"

But they did not see the point. They wanted to rush to Caswallon's aid and share in the glory of cutting down the hereditary enemy. Three jumped overboard and swam for it.

"Back to your arrow-engine, Orwic! Shoot the next man who leaves his bench! Row or Lud rot you! One! Two! One! Two! Easy, starboard. Port ahead. Now, altogether, back her!"

He swung the bireme's stern toward the longship's kedge-warp, and sent Conops overside to bend another warp to it, making that fast to the bireme's stern. Then—downstream now—he bullied them all to rowing until the kedge came up and the bireme swayed like a pendulum in midstream, mud boiling all around her.

"Watch those three Northmen, Orwic! Shoot if they try to cast off!"

The longship heeled. Her bow began to swing round on the mud. Two of the three who guarded her ran to cut the kedge-warp with their swords.

"Shoot!" Orwic loosed twelve arrows in one flight and one man fell; the other hid himself below the bulwarks; the third sprang to the longship's stern and hacked the warp through with a battle-ax, but too late; the ship slid off the mud and glided into midstream.

The bireme shot ahead when the warp parted; it was a minute before backed oars could take the way off her; then, port oars forward, starboard oars astern, Tros swung her in a circle in midstream.

Two minutes after that they broke three oars as the bireme bumped the longship and a dozen Britons led by Orwic jumped aboard. The two Northmen took to the river like water-rats; four Britons plunged after them; Tros lashed the ships together, beam to beam and let them drift downriver with the tide, which set toward the south bank, away from the fighting.

A quarter of a mile downstream he dropped two anchors, he and Conops standing guard over the cables lest the indignant Britons should cut them and try to row across to the other side. Only Orwic, and he nervously, stood by him; the remainder, wounded included, threatened and cursed him for a flinching coward; but as they could not swim, they could not leave him.

Tros watched the far bank, trying to imagine what he himself would do if he were a Northman hemmed in by determined enemies and cut off from his ship. Those Northmen doubtless had a leader wise in war, chosen to lead raids because of previous successes.

He did not believe they would have landed without exploring all the riverbank; it was at least an even chance that the two who had swum for shore had reached their friends to warn them the ship was gone.

Orwic bit his fingernails, torn three ways between loyalty to Tros, anxiety for his friends ashore and eagerness to lead his own men into the thick of the fighting.

"By Lud, we will be too late!" he grumbled. "Too late! Too late! Tros—"

"If Caswallon can keep them away from the river, there's no need for us," Tros answered. "If they reach the river, they'll find boats and try to recapture their ship."

"But there aren't any boats!" Orwic objected.

"Then again, no need for us. But I will wager there are boats, among the reeds, and the Northmen know it."

"Then let's hunt for boats and burn them!"

Tros laughed.

"Set this crowd of ours ashore, and who'll keep them out of the fighting!"

The Britons, and some of the wounded with them, had nearly all jumped into the longship and were holding a sort of parliament, even the hired seamen taking part. An iron bolt hurled at Tros just missed him where he stood in the bireme's bow, and some one shouted—

"Cross the river, or we'll burn both ships!"

They had found the Northmen's fire-pot and meant business; there was smoke where half-a-dozen of them stooped over a box full of kindling, blowing on it.

"By Pluto's teeth! Ye'll burn my prize of war?"

He would rather see a city burned than lose that sweet-lined ship. He leaped on the longship's bow, roared like a bull and charged them, scattering them right and left, kicking fire-pot and kindling overboard before they could draw their weapons; and by that time he had his back against the mast, the hilt of his long sword on a level with his chin, its point just sufficiently in motion to confirm the resolution in its owner's eye.

They were not afraid of him exactly. There was none, at that crisis, who would not have dared to try conclusions. They had all fought Romans on the Kentish coast, had beaten Cæsar's men at Seine-mouth, had been trained, since they were old enough to hold a weapon, against the wolf, the Northmen and the neighboring British tribes.

Cowardice was their pet abomination. But he had them puzzled. They were Celts, hereditary gentlemen, much given to reflection and to arguing all sides of everything, deeply versed in chivalry and legend, and despising the notion of attacking one man in overwhelming numbers. Against any one except Northmen they preferred argument to violence. They admired him for his daring to defy them all.

Four of them kept him backed against the mast; six others engaged Conóps in the longship's bow, while two more hacked the cables through and set both ships adrift again.

But they drifted toward the wrong shore naturally, since the tide set that way. Within a hundred yards they were aground on clinging mud, and in a moment after that there were only wounded left to reckon with; the remainder, hired seamen and all, had plunged overside and were struggling shoulder-deep to reach the swampy bank and hunt for boats, rafts, anything in which to cross the river.

Orwic hesitated. Tros took pity on him and a shrewd thought for himself.

"Friend o' mine, I give you leave to go," he said, laughing, and Orwic jumped overside without touching the bulwark.

"And so by law, if there is any law, the longship's mine," Tros chuckled.

Some of the Britons began to swim across the river, using logs to help them breast the third of a mile of strong stream. Four men found a raft near the edge of the swamp and wasted several minutes arguing with seven wounded men who tried to take it from them, until Orwic arrived and seized command; he put the wounded on the raft and made the others help him swim the crazy thing.

Several men found horses—Britons could be trusted to smell a horse if there was one within five miles—and within fifteen minutes of the ships' touching the mud the last horse took the water with its long mane held by two men and a third—he had only one arm—clinging to its tail.

Battle raged unseen on the far bank, to the tune of horn-blasts and the crash of falling trees. Chariot and horseback fighting—the Britons' favorite method—had developed a type of defensive tactics to correspond; they were experts at felling trees in the path of an advancing or retreating enemy, ringing him around if possible, blocking the narrow forest paths and reënforcing the dense, tangled undergrowth with massive tree-trunks.

It was easy to read the wavering fortune of the battle by observing trees that fell, in different directions, three, four at a time.

Once it seemed as if the Northmen were surrounded, then as if they were making good their retreat toward where they had left their longship. But that might have been a feint; the shouting and crashing changed direction; there followed a din of horn-blasts as the Britons re-formed ranks and rushed to block a new line of retreat.

Once three Northmen, iron helmeted and armed with battle-axes, showed themselves on a bare hillock near by the ruins of a burned hut on the riverbank, but they were cut down instantly by a score of Britons who rushed out of the forest.

Once Tros thought he saw Caswallon, mounted, galloping along the river's edge to turn the Northmen's flank.

It was easy now to distinguish Norse from British horn-blasts; the Northmen's note was flat, blown on an ox-horn; the Britons used copper and even silver instruments that rang through the woods with an exciting peal. Shouting and horn-blasts signified that the Northmen had fought clear of the felled-tree barriers, were retiring in considerable number almost parallel with the riverbank, their right flank possibly two hundred yards away from it, with an apparently impenetrable thicket in between them and the river.

By the sound they were circling that thicket on the far side of it. The Britons were striving to crowd them against it.

Except for a few feet of stump-dotted marsh it reached almost to the water's edge—an obstacle to Briton and Northman alike; but once or twice Tros could see Britons creeping into it to take the Northmen in flank or from the rear, armed with spears with which to thrust at the Northmen's backs from behind the cover of the undergrowth.

Once, about two score Britons tried to make their way between the river and the trees, jumping from clump to clump of turf and rotting roots, but the strip of marsh came to an end in knee-deep mud in which they floundered until they gave up the attempt and struggled back again to hack a path through the undergrowth toward the enemy's flank.

Ten minutes after that, the Northmen's strategy revealed itself. They fought their way around the thicket to a creek that Tros could not see because of intervening trees. The news that they had reached it was announced by a frantic chorus of British bugle-notes.

Another thirty or forty Britons charged along the riverbank and tried to force their way to the creek-mouth, but were prevented by the mud that grew deeper the farther they went, until some of them floundered to the breast in it and had to be hauled out by their friends.

And presently, from behind the trees that shut off Tros's view of the creek-mouth, three small boats emerged crowded with Northmen, towing others who clung to the boats' gunwales helping to shove the boats along until the water grew too deep.

The Northmen's shields were a solid phalanx, behind which they crouched in the boats, protecting the paddlers against British arrows. Some of the men in the water swam with shields over their heads, but some were already drowning. Tros counted nearly sixty men, and there were more behind them, too late for the boats or crowded out, dodging missiles as they swam.

Their leader stood in the first boat, a big man with long moustaches drooping to his chin and a bushy, clipped, red beard; young, hardly thirty by the look of him, but a giant in stature, with a head that drooped a little forward as if he were a habitual deep-thinker, or else wounded or very weary.

He was nearly a full head taller than the tallest of his men, two of whom stood beside him. Their eyes were on the Britons ashore, but his were on the longship. He stood recklessly, ignoring arrows, hardly troubling to raise the painted shield on his left arm. As the boats drew nearer Tros saw three women crouching among the men.

"If that chief loves a ship as I do, he will fight," Tros said to Conops. "Swiftly, bid our wounded show their heads above the bulwark."

The longship had had the inside berth when both ships took the mud, but the tide had carried their sterns around, pivoting them on the bireme's ram, which presently stuck fast, so that now both sterns were out into the stream, with the longship free except for the ropes that held her to the bireme's side.

Smashed oars, jammed between them, kept the ships' sides from grinding, and the water making in the bireme's hold brought her down by the stern, so that she lay now for two-thirds of her length on soft mud, immovable until they should pump the water out and the tide should turn again and lift her.

Tros climbed up to the bireme's poop, leaving Conops on the longship's bow, and carefully chose twelve arrows from the basket, laying them in the arrow-engine's grooves and cranking the clumsy mechanism that drew the bow taut. Then he studied the wounded; there was not one man among them fit for fighting; whoever could carry his weight had gone with Orwic to the battle in the woods.

"Men of Lunden," Tros said, for he knew they liked that better than if he had called them Britons, "we will burn both ships under us rather than let the Northmen have them! But I think those Northmen have a bellyful. Let your heads appear and reappear, as if there were a host of you crouching below the bulwark."

Many of them lacked strength to keep their chins above the bulwark for more than a few seconds at a time. They raised their heads, let go, and struggled up again to watch. The approaching boats came very slowly, for lack of enough paddles and because of the overload and the strength of the tide in midstream.

On the far shore the Britons were using horses to drag felled trees into the water, laboring shoulder deep to lash a raft together on which enough of them might cross to dare to give the Northmen battle.

But that was a work that required time; the Northmen had burned all the buildings within reach, so there were no doors or hewn timber available.

The Northmen appeared to have no information about arrow-engines, but they seemed to expect ordinary arrow-fire. As they won their way across stream in slow procession, more than fifty yards apart, and the distance between them increasing, they kept their boats' heads pointed toward the ships' sterns to reduce the breadth of the target, and the men in the bows raised a sloping barricade of locked shields; but they were wooden shields. Tros's engine could have shot a flight of arrows through them as easily as an ordinary arrow goes through leather jerkins.

The Northman chief chose to lighten his boat. He growled an order and six men leaped into the water, leaving only twelve and three women. The six, along with those who had swum alongside all the way, turned back and made for the second boat, which was already overcrowded.

Leaning his weight against the table on which the arrow-engine turned, Tros let the leading boat approach within two ships' lengths before he tried conclusions.

"Who comes here to yield himself?" he shouted then in the Gaulish tongue, for he knew neither Norse nor any of the dialects of northern Britain, which a Northman might possibly have understood.

That leading boat was at his mercy; it was a frail thing, nearly awash with the weight of men; but he could see those fair-haired women crouching among the men's legs, and though he would have taken oath before a pantheon of gods that his own heart was invulnerable—that whether a foe was male or female was all one to him—he held his finger on the trigger yet a while.

The Northmen seemed to hesitate. They let their boat turn sidewise, head upstream, exposing its whole flank to Tros. The chieftain in the midst uphove a great two-headed ax and gestured at the bireme's stern, shouting strange words in a voice that resembled waves echoing in caverns.

It appeared he was defying Tros to single combat, a disturbing possibility that Tros had overlooked. He was under no compulsion to accept a challenge, but he knew what the Britons—and their women in particular—would say of any man who should refuse one. It was part of the tactics of war so to fight as to provide an enemy no opportunity to issue such a challenge until the outcome of single combat could not affect the issue either way.

However, Tros was not sure he had understood yet; and there were no women in the third boat, which was laboring in midstream, losing headway against the tide. They were rowing with a pole and broken branches. He loosed the flight of arrows at it, plunking the whole dozen square amidships.

The wounded Britons yelled delight. The arrows pierced the shields and struck men down, who fell against the farther gunwale and upset the crowded boat. The others, jumping to save themselves, capsized it, and it drifted downstream, bottom upward.

The second boat backed out of range, avoiding the men in the water because there was no room for them. It was nearly awash already without the added burden of strong hands on the gunwale and heavy men seeking to clamber overside; its crew of discouraged Northmen elected presently to drift downstream, hoping perhaps to make connection with the crew of the other longship lower down.

So there was only one boat left to deal with for the moment, one boat, eleven men, and that great, grim Northman captain, with the women crouching at his knees. The Northman's eyes were on the longship; he was close enough for Tros to see them and to recognize despair, the mother of forlorn hope.

No ruler loves a kingdom as the true sea-captain loves a ship he has built and navigated through the rock-staked seas. Tros knew that blue-eyed yearning; he could ever feel it in his own bones when he planned the queen of all ships he would some day build and sail into the unknown.

He laid another dozen arrows in the grooves and cranked the engine; but the Northman, who could see him plainly, stayed within range, flourishing his ax as if he courted death, bellowing his bull-mouthed phrases that to Tros conveyed less meaning than his gestures.

They were a challenge repeated again and again. There was no humility about that man; in his defeat he was as splendid as in victory, demanding a right that no brave man might keep from him. One of the wounded Britons called to Tros, interpreting his words:

"He bids you fight him for the longship. Beat him, says he, and he surrenders to you—he and his men and his women. If he beats you, he takes the longship and you must help him sail it home. But if each should kill the other, then his men- and women-folk are at Caswallon's mercy! Those are his terms. You must fight him, Tros!"

But it irked Tros to be told he must do anything. He could have shot that Northman down, and though the wounded Britons would have mocked him for a coward, he was strong-willed; he could face their scorn if he saw fit.

His eyes were on the farther riverbank, where now a hundred of Caswallon's men were working like beavers to build the raft, and he was calculating just how long they would require to finish it and pole it across the river. He decided they would never be able to move such a clumsy platform fast enough through the water to overtake the Northmen, although if the bireme and the longship were attacked they might arrive in time to save both, and if they were successful they would claim the longship as their lawful plunder.

It was therefore up to him, Tros, to decide, and to do it swiftly.

He doubted Caswallon, remembered that Gaulish fishing boat dismasted in the channel storm, recalled to mind the likelihood that Cæsar's men had undermined him in Caswallon's favor by some ingenious means. Even if Tros should fight for the longship and defeat the Northman, Caswallon might claim as his own property all shipping captured in the Thames.

Cæsar's treasure-chest, left with Caswallon for safe keeping, would be a strong temptation to Caswallon's intimates, if not to the chief himself to force a quarrel, and the longship, if Tros should claim it for his own, might prove an excellent excuse. It was a sharp predicament.

But the Northman kept on challenging, and the wounded Britons urged. And suddenly a blue-eyed girl stood up beside the Northman, with fair hair falling in long plaits nearly to her knees.

She set one foot on the gunwale and mocked Tros in the Gaulish language, calling him a coward among other names. The words were ill-pronounced, but her voice throbbed with such scorn as Tros had never listened to—he who had heard harbor-women scold their lovers on the wharfs of Antioch and Alexandria!

The words—he knew their worth and could ignore them—might have left him careless, but the voice and her manner brought the hot blood to his cheeks. He had never seen a woman like her, had never before felt such strange emotions as her anger stirred in him. She looked not older than nineteen.

Tros threw his hand up in a gesture of command. Briton and Northman alike paused breathless at his signal.

"Tell me your name!" he demanded.

He had right to know that; a man did not engage in single combat with inferiors by birth.

"I am Olaf Sigurdsen of Malmoe."

"I am Tros, the son of Perseus Prince of Samothrace," Tros answered, laughing to himself.

His father would have been finely scandalized at the proceedings.

"I will fight you on your own terms. Come aboard."

They paddled the boat toward the bireme, but Tros bade them halt when they were half a dozen boats' lengths distant. He had heard that Northmen were colossal liars, although he had only heard that from their enemies, the Britons. He knew they were plunderers by profession; he doubted it was in them to keep faith if they should learn that only wounded men were on the bireme and that the longship lay defenseless. He summoned Conops, posted him at the loaded arrow-engine.

"Come aboard alone," he said then, speaking slowly, waiting for the blue-eyed girl to interpret to Olaf Sigurdsen.

He laid his right hand on the arrow-engine.

"You may put in to the riverbank. I will count it treachery if more than one man steps ashore. Then climb onto this bireme over the bow, and let the boat put out again into the river. You must fight me on my own poop, Olaf Sigurdsen."

"I will come, and yet, I have no proof of you," the Northman answered.

The blue-eyed girl translated that with such withering scorn that Tros winced. Olaf Sigurdsen sat down, perhaps to rest himself, but the girl stood, continuing to glare at Tros until the boat's bow touched the mud and she had to clutch the chieftain's head to keep her balance.

Conops turned the arrow-engine, following the boat, and went through ostentatious pantomine of taking aim; but Olaf Sigurdsen jumped ashore and they poled the boat out again into the stream, driving the pole into the mud presently to serve as an anchor against the tide.

Then Sigurdsen came up over the bow, battle-ax on hip, stood, realizing how he had deceived himself. Tros's wounded Britons sprawled along the deck below the bulwark, most of them with hardly strength enough to grin at him, some almost in the grip of death, all bleeding through blood-stiffened bandages. He saw the shapes of dead men under the sail-cloth forward of one citadel and gave a great laugh, lifting his battle-ax high and shouting to his friends.

The Northmen cheered and all three women in the boat mocked Tros, the young girl thumping her breast, shouting in Gaulish so that Tros might understand. She claimed Tros as her own slave, to fetch and carry and to feed swine.

"Don't slay him! Beat him to his knees!" she cried, and repeated that too.

"You may come," said Tros. He drew well back along the poop, drawing his long sword, throwing off the Roman cloak and stepping close to the arrow-engine, so that Conops might unbuckle the breast-armor.

The wounded Britons cheered him when the armor fell on deck, for they despised a man who did not bare his naked breast to an assailant. Then, pulling off his shirt, Tros flexed his huge muscles so that the hairy skin moved in waves and the Britons cheered him again, he keeping his eyes on Sigurdsen and speaking through the corner of his mouth to Conops:

"Now, no dog's work! Keep your knife to yourself! If you so much as lift a hand to help me I'll turn from the fighting to skewer you to the deck! You understand? Hands off!"

Sigurdsen came slowly up the ladder to the poop, ready to jump backward if Tros should spring at him before his feet were on the deck, but Tros gave him full law and a breathing spell, considering the iron links on the outside of the Northman's leather jerkin, wondering whether the iron was soft or brittle.

The Northman wore no helmet; he had lost it in the fighting over-river. His reddish hair hung to his shoulders and his bloodshot eyes shone with a gleam of desperation under an untidy fringe; and he had brought no shield. He looked tired, but he was not wounded; the blood on his face was from a scratch caused by brambles as he fought his way out of the forest.

For a full minute he and Tros stood studying each other, Conops whispering advice that Tros ignored:

"The point, master! The point! Up, and under the chin! Remember, an ax is all blade. He can only swing with it, but he has a long reach. Keep close, where he can only use short chops, and use your point!"

At last the Northman growled like an angry bear and came on, his weight on the balls of his feet, which made him tower above Tros, holding his great ax forward in both hands.

Tros met him with the point, stock-motionless, not giving ground, until the Northman stepped back suddenly and with the speed of lightning swung at the sword to break it. Tros's wrist hardly moved, but the ax-blade missed the sword-blade by an inch and the point went in between two links in the Northman's mail.

The prick of that maddened him; he came on like a whirlwind, swinging the ax upward at Tros's jaw—missed, because Tros stepped back at last. Then, rising on both feet, he aimed two-handed at the crown of Tros's head.

Tros sprang aside, expecting the ax would crash into the deck and leave the Northman at his mercy, but the blow was turned in mid-descent and swept at him as if his body were a tree-trunk, slicing the skin at his waist—then the same blow back again, back-handed, quicker than a snake's strike, and Tros had to jump clear.

The Northman rushed him, crouched a little, with his knees bent, thrusting upward at the sword-blade, so that Tros's lunge only skinned his crown, beginning at the forehead; but that brought blood down into the Northman's eyes, half-blinding him, and he missed his next swing wildly.

He tried to shake the blood off, spared his left hand for a second, but that cost him a thrust through the arm, and Conops yelled retorts in Greek to the women who screamed encouragement in Norse.

Tros had his man now, knew it, carried the fight to him, side-stepping the prodigious swings and thrusting, forever thrusting with short jabs at the Northman's right arm, circling cautiously around him with his knees bent and his legs spread well apart.

The air screamed with the ax-blows. Twice the Northman knocked the sword-blade upward, rushed in under it and tried to brain Tros with the upthrust, using the ax-end like a club; and Tros had never fought an ax-man; he caught the first of those blows underneath his armpit and for a moment it deadened his whole left side.

But every time the Northman pressed a savage charge home it cost him blood from some part of his body. Ten times Tros could have killed him and refrained. He kept on thrusting at the right arm until the blood streamed down and the ax-hilt slipped in the Northman's fingers.

Then for two or three titanic minutes Sigurdsen swung with his left alone, using his right to grab Tros's sword-blade; but Tros opened the cut in his forehead again and the Northman jumped back to the poop-rail, trying to shake blood out of his eyes.

"Now kill him, master!" Conops shouted. "Up under the chin and finish him!"

But Tros stood back, breathing heavily, point forward and his sword-hand high.

"Now yield!" he said to Sigurdsen, ignoring the yells of the

Northmen in the boat, that might have put him on guard if he had paid attention to them.

He spared one swift glance for the Britons over-river; they were coming at last, a hundred of them crowded on a crazy craft, with horses swimming loose on either side of it and two men clinging to each horse's tail.

But that one glance was nearly one too many. In the fraction of the second that he spared for it the Northman stiffened, whirled his ax and hurled it with both hands at Tros's head. It cut his right cheek as he sidestepped to avoid it, crashed against the citadel and stuck in the woodwork, humming.

"And now, Olaf Sigurdsen, yield yourself; for you and your women and those other men are mine!" said Tros.

Sigurdsen bowed his head and held up his right hand. Conops shouted at the top of his lungs in Greek, and the wounded Britons cheered, raising themselves by the bulwark to taunt the Northmen in the boat. Sigurdsen offered his throat for Tros's sword, but Tros wiped his blade on Conops' shirt and rammed it home into the sheath.

"And the longship, too, is mine!" he said.

Sigurdsen nodded. He and Tros could understand each other when the conversation was of such essentials as ships.

Tros held out his right hand.

"Can you see it, Sigurdsen?" he asked.

The Northman shook the blood out of his eyes again, stared dumbly for a moment, came two or three steps forward as if doubting what he saw and stood rigid, waiting. He was dazed. It seemed he still expected to be killed.

Tros seized him in both arms, patting him on the back, and Conops cried, being a Greek, who had few emotions of his own but huge capacity for feeling what he supposed Tros felt. The Northman sobbed as if his lungs would burst, but whether that was grief or anger none might say; and there came a keening from the boat alongside, led by women's voices.

They had had to keep faith, whether or not they had intended it, because the raft was nearly in midstream and there was no longer the slightest hope of escape from the hurrying Britons.

Tros kicked the arrow-basket and up-ended it, let Sigurdsen sit there, and ordered Conops to bring water and cleanse his wounds. Then he pulled on his shirt and leaned overside to speak to the girl who had mocked him.

She was silent, dry-eyed, standing in the boat—it was the other, older women and the men who wailed. Her eyes met Tros's defiantly, bewildering blue eyes like flakes of northern sky under her flaxen hair, eyes that made Tros feel unfamiliar emotions; they seemed able to rob him of the fruit of victory.

"You may come up and tell me your name," he said gruffly.

"I am Helma, sister of Olaf Sigurdsen," she answered. But she made no motion to obey him; simply stood there with her hands clasped.

Tros vaulted the rail, descended midway down the wooden ladder that was spiked to the bireme's side and offered her his right hand. She refused it with an imperious chin-gesture that commanded him to climb and let her follow; so he laughed and led.

She was beside him almost before his own feet touched the deck. There their eyes met again and he smiled, but she turned her back, went to her brother's side to take the sponge from Conops and attend his wound. She said not one word to Tros or to her brother or to any one.

CHAPTER XXX

TROS MAKES PRISONERS AND FALLS IN NEED OF FRIENDS

Is the Now not the child of the past? Is not the Future the child of past and present, even as a man is the child of man and woman? Is not all that written on the scroll of Destiny? It is written. None can alter it.

Nevertheless, there is that which is not written, but that each himself shall write. Though Omnipotence itself can alter not one line of Destiny, no power of earth or heaven, nor Omnipotence itself, can hold you from using Destiny as mariners use wind and wave.

Those waves that can overwhelm, and that neither sacrifice nor cunning can prevent, are also buoyant. Lo, they bear up this, they drown that. Destiny, I tell you, is the waves from what ye did in former lives. Swim them or sink beneath them. Your Eternity depends on what

ye do with Destiny, that ye can neither buy off nor in any way prevent.
FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE raft drew near, and as the horses' feet found bottom they were harnassed to it to increase the speed. Caswallon, with Orwic beside him, stood in the raft's bow, wiping blood off the white skin over his ribs where a Northman's spear had entered an inch or two. He wore belted breeches, spear and shield, and a little peaked iron cap, but the blue designs painted on his skin made it look as if he wore a shirt, too, until he was a dozen yards away.

There was no news Tros could give him. Orwic had told about Volstrum's ship, sunk lower down the Thames. The Northmen whom Tros could claim as his own prisoners, men and women, had climbed aboard the bireme and were standing in the ship's waist looking miserable, all except Sigurdsen's wife, who was helping Helma tend his wounds.

The other woman was a widow; her man had been cut down by the Britons in the forest fighting and she was keening to the sky about her loss.

As many of the wounded Britons on the bireme as could stand up shouted to Caswallon and his men the news of Sigurdsen's surrender, including the terms of combat and the fact that the longship belonged to Tros.

By the look on Orwic's face there was something in the wind beside the Northmen business; he kept glancing at Caswallon and from him to Tros, who for his own part studied the prisoners and counted their weapons on the poop beside him. Conops, swearing Greek oaths, leaned against the arrow-engine, itching to loose its charge against the Britons on the raft if they should dare to invade the longship. He knew how much loot they would leave in it! They would burn it when every movable stick had been ripped away.

However, Caswallon came hand-over-hand up the bireme's ladder, followed by Orwic and six others; he ordered the men on the raft ashore to find some way of following the Norse fugitives downstream. Half a dozen tried to disobey him, swarming up the bireme's side, but he jumped off the poop and beat them back with his spear-butt, the others laughing at them from the raft.

Then Caswallon looked the wounded over—a third of them were his blood-relations—and said a few words to each before he climbed the poop again and answered Tros's salute.

"So you have come home, Tros!"

He smiled, but he did not offer to embrace Tros as the British custom was. "Orwic tells me you are a great sea-captain."

His words were almost cordial; there only lacked a half-note and the old careless air of friendship to make him the same Caswallon who had seen the bireme on its way from Lunden ten days before—but that might be due to the fighting over-river and distress to see so many good men dead and maimed. Tros answered with his hands behind him:

"I bring my father's body, for which I must beg obsequies. I crave the favor that he may lie in British earth beside your own brave men. Caswallon, not a man is missing; dead or alive I have brought them all."

Caswallon nodded, glancing to right and left.

"Are you well enough paid—with a longship and—how many prisoners?" he asked.

"I never asked payment," Tros answered. "Caswallon, what is wrong between us?"

Caswallon frowned, stroking his moustache and tossing the long hair back over his shoulder. For a moment he studied the blue-eyed girl who was washing her brother's wounds; but she turned her back toward him, and he met Tros's eyes again.

"If what I hear of you is true, I will nevertheless remember former friendship, Tros. If it is not true, it is better not spoken in men's hearing. Let us talk alone."

Tros led the way down from the poop and into the cabin where his father's body lay. The smell in there was stifling; Caswallon snorted, but Tros threw the door wide and they stood together studying the old man's face.

"Like a druid," Caswallon said at the end of a long silence.

"Greater than any druid," Tros answered gruffly.

"What are those marks on his wrists?" Caswallon asked.

"Cæsar tortured him."

They faced each other in the light that poured through the open door.

"Is it true, or is it not true, Tros, that you have made a pact with Cæsar?"

"It is not true," Tros said frowning. "Who has come telling you that lie?"

"Skell. You spared Skell's life when you had the right to kill him. You sent him to Cæsar, as you told me, to help you to trick Cæsar. But now Skell returns with a tale about secret intriguing."

Tros whistled.

"I turned Skell over to Cæsar's men at Caritia, thinking they would put him in the pest-house. Has Skell won Cæsar's confidence so soon?"

"He is home again, and in strange company," said Caswallon. "I have not seen him, but—"

Tros laid a hand on Caswallon's arm.

"I speak," he said, "in the presence of the dead. Believe me or Skell! Which shall it be?"

Caswallon turned his back and stood for a full minute in the doorway, stroking his chin, watching the wounded on the deck. Druids had arrived from somewhere; with their long skirts tucked into their girdles they were pouring liquid on to stiffened bandages, examining wounds, behaving workmanly, as if they knew their trade. Caswallon turned suddenly.

"Tros," he exclaimed, "I am beholden to you twice, and I would not take Skell's word for it that the sun is not the moon. Yet Orwic tells me you refused to fight the Northmen until you ran into them down-river and there was no room for you to run; he tells me that at Seine-mouth you spoke with Cæsar in Latin, which is a tongue we Britons don't understand."

"I called on Cæsar to surrender to me," Tros interrupted. "He had climbed over the bow when I sunk his boat and— "

"And Orwic tried to capture him, but you called Orwic off. Cæsar did not surrender, but you and he spoke, after which he escaped. And now comes Skell to Hythe, whence he sends me a letter by a woman's hand; and the woman says Cæsar has promised you my kingdom when I am dead, in return for your having spared his life. She had a letter for you from Cæsar, written in Latin, which I can not read. These Northmen raided Hythe before they came up-

Thames. How is it you were so long following them up-river?"

"Storms! I was hove-to in the ocean. Moreover, I did not know of Northmen in the Thames. When I saw the smoke of villages—"

"My men say you refused to let them land and run to my aid."

"Did I not sink a longship?" Tros answered indignantly.

"Yes, when there was no other alternative. And now, when you might have shot these other Northmen down, you let one whole boatload of them escape, and you accept their chief's surrender to yourself—their chief, three women and how many men? I find that strange."

"Will you listen to me?" Tros asked; and when Caswallon nodded he told his own story from the beginning, omitting no details, not even his own qualms and his thoughts of making for the Belgian coast.

"For I foresaw you might doubt me, and I knew Cæsar would be swift with some ingenious trick. Now it amounts to this, Caswallon: I am Cæsar's enemy, and your friend. But you and I are free men. You may end our friendship when it pleases you."

Caswallon hesitated, with his hands behind him. There was something on his mind still.

"I have told all. What are you keeping from me?" Tros asked him.

"You shall speak with Fflur," Caswallon answered.

Tros breathed relief. Whoever else was fickle, he knew Fflur. Caswallon's wife was loyal to Caswallon, but no subtlety could undermine her judgment; she could see through men and their intrigues; she ruled her husband and his corner of Britain without his knowing it; and she was Tros's friend.

"In the meanwhile?" Tros asked.

"I do not forget you were my friend," Caswallon answered, "and though you have lost me sixty men on your adventure, you have saved me it may be a hundred in their place by sinking that Northman down-river. I am king here and the river rights are mine, but you may have that longship and your prisoners. That chest of Cæsar's gold you left with Fflur is yours, too. You may bury your father's corpse in British earth. Thereafter we will hear what Fflur says."

Caswallon strode out on the deck and went to where the druids were tending wounds. Because he was the chief, a druid tried to insist on bandaging the spear-wound over his ribs, but Caswallon took the druid by the shoulders and shoved him back to the task he had left, standing then to watch the marvels of swift surgery the druids wrought.

They had a drug that caused unconsciousness; they opened one man's skull and inset bone from the skull of another who had been dead an hour or two;* one druid opened his own vein and surrendered a quart of blood for the veins of a man who had nearly bled to death. But they amputated no limbs; if a leg or an arm was beyond their skill to repair, they let the man die whole, as he had come into the world, easing his death with an anodyne.

Tros returned to the poop, where Sigurdsen sat glowering at the Britons, his wife wailing on the deck beside him, and the blue-eyed Helma standing, her back to the rail and her chin high, too proud to shed tears, too hopeless to speak even to her own kin.

She looked away over Tros's shoulder at the skyline, and Tros, who had seen well-bred women sold at auction in many a foreign port, turned over in his mind what he might say that should console her—possibly a little, if not much.

"Can your people ransom you?" he asked.

She met his eyes and answered with surprising calm, her voice not trembling:

"No. These are all my people. There was war and the men of Helsing burned our villages. There was neither corn nor dried meat left, and the fishing is hard in winter, so we came to seize a holding here, my brother and Volstrum of Fiborg-by-Malmoe, with their two ships and all the men that remained. Most of the women and children had been carried off by the men of Helsing. None can ransom us unless Volstrum comes up-river, and if he comes—"

"He will not come," Tros assured her. "I have sunk his ship. If he is not drowned he will fall into the Britons' hands."

She betrayed no emotion at that news, but repeated it in Norse to her brother, who laid his head between his hands and groaned aloud.

"Will you sell her to me?" asked a Briton, one of the men who had been in the thick of the fighting across the river and had boarded the bireme with Caswallon. "I bid you two man-slaves and two horses for her."

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* Many of the skulls discovered in ancient British burying-places and on battlefields bear marks of having been trephined.

"No," Tros answered, and the other Britons sneered at the man who made the bid.

They all had slaves. Buying and selling was lawful; they now and then sold criminals and captives to foreign ship-owners to replace sailors who had died of scurvy; but they did not approve of barter in human beings.

However, there was an atmosphere of enmity to Tros; some one had been spreading rumors. They held aloof from him, giving him two-thirds of the bireme's poop instead of crowding to ask questions or to boast of their own prowess against the Northmen in the woods.

"What shall I do with you?" Tros asked, meeting the girl's sky-blue eyes.

He knew what he would do with Sigurdsen unless destiny should interfere; so Sigurdsen's wife was no problem, and the widow-woman, who was wailing in a corner below the poop, would dry her eyes before long and be chosen as some man's mate. But this fair-haired girl puzzled him.

"I said what I would do if Sigurdsen had beaten you!" she answered. "I would have put iron on your neck and you should have fetched and carried for me."

"But I beat Sigurdsen," said Tros. "I am obliged to make provision for you. Shall I marry you to one of his men?"

She bared her teeth.

"Anything but that," she answered scornfully. "They all ran from the men of Helsing. They ran! And their women and children became captives! Yonder in those woods they ran again, instead of dying where they stood!"

Suddenly her eyes laughed, as if she saw the ultimate of irony and took delight in it.

"I belong to you," she went on. "Are you also a coward?"

Tros stroked his black beard, squaring back his shoulders. Not so soon, if ever, would he link fate with a woman. His father had instilled into him at least that one conviction: Yielding to that lure and freedom of earth and sea were incompatible.

"I have yet to meet the woman who can conquer me!" he answered.

She glared as if she would like to stab him; but he saw something else in her eyes that he could not read, and he was aware of a prodigious impulse to befriend her.

If she only had used the usual feminine ways of ensnaring a man, he would have felt more at ease; but she did none of that. She turned away from him and knelt beside her brother, speaking to him earnestly in Norse, which Tros could not understand.

Sigurdsen stood up presently and looked straight at Tros. He was already in a fever from his wounds, and his eyes burned desperately, although his face was sad and was made to look sadder by the long moustache that drooped below his chin. He spoke about a dozen words, Helma interpreting, kneeling, speaking very loud because her back was toward Tros.

"Put us all into the longship! Therein burn us! We will not seek to escape."

Tros laughed at that.

"Not I," he answered. "I need the longship and I need a crew. You and I might burn a fleet or two, Sigurdsen. Britons say Northmen are bold liars; Greeks have the name of being crafty ones, and Greek is my mother tongue, so how can you and I pledge faith?"

Helma interpreted, glancing once at Tros over her shoulder.

"I am Olaf Sigurdsen," the Northman answered, and closed his lips. But Helma added to that, standing at last and holding her chin high:

"If you were good Norse stock, instead of a barbarian with amber eyes, you would know what that means!"

"Tell him he must keep faith better than he fights, if he hopes to please me," Tros answered; for he liked the look of Olaf Sigurdsen; he wanted to prod him and find what lay beneath the sorry mask.

The girl flared until her cheeks were crimson under the flaxen hair. Her breast heaved with passion; her hands grew white with pressure as she clenched her fingers; but she contrived to force a frozen note into her voice, speaking straight at Tros as if each word were a knife aimed at his throat:

"He was a spent man when he fought you, or you would be his slave this minute. He has slain his two-score Britons in the forest.

You—you do not know courage! You do not know faith! How shall I tell you the worth of his promises? You, who never kept faith! Olaf Sigurdsen's fathers were kings when ice first closed in on the North and darkness fell at midday. I am a king's daughter! Shall he and I waste words on you?"

Tros liked her. He forbore to answer her in kind. And he had seen too often the results of promises exacted under force. Yet he needed friends; he needed them that minute.

"Is he homeless, and has been a king? I, too, am homeless and the son of a prince. It seems to me we have a common ground to meet on," he said, speaking very slowly that she might lose none of the significance. "When a man plights faith to me I hold him to it, but I repay him in kind.

"Say, to Sigurdsen, I give him choice. He may fight me again when he has rested, to-morrow, or the next day, or a month from now; and in that case I will kill him. Or he may ask my friendship and make promise to obey me as his captain; and in that case he shall find in honorable service no indignity. Or, if he wishes, I will give you all to Caswallon, who is a king, whereas I am not one. Let Sigurdsen speak his mind."

The girl's reaction to that speech was vivid. She changed color, bit her lip, grew pale and red again, regarding Tros from another aspect altogether. She seemed to have grown nervous.

"A prince's son?" she said, and turned to her brother, speaking to him hurriedly in breathless sentences, clutching his sleeve, repeating short phrases again and again.

Her brother watched Tros's eyes, making no sign until she had finished. Then, after a minute's pause, he said hardly a dozen words.

"Olaf Sigurdsen desires your friendship. He will obey you but none other!" the girl interpreted; then added, "He means by that—"

"I know what he means by that," Tros interrupted, and turned to Conops, who was listening with unconcealed but mixed emotions. He pointed toward the Northman's ax, its blade buried deep in the woodwork of the citadel.

"Bring it!"

Conops never disobeyed; but he obeyed that order like a dog sent to the kennel, taking his time about wrenching the ax free, and longer still about returning with it. Tros snatched it from his hand impatiently and offered it hilt-first to Sigurdsen:

"Now let me hear your promise as a free man with a weapon in your hand," he said deliberately. "Speak it without guile, as in the presence of your fathers' gods. . . . For by the gods of earth and heaven I need friends," he added to himself.

But Conops swore Greek oaths below his breath, and glared at Sigurdsen as a dog glares at a new, prospective kennel-mate.

CHAPTER XXXI

A MAN NAMED SKELL RETURNS FROM GAUL

Be in no haste to accuse each other. Be slow of vengeance; swift to acknowledge kindness. Bait ye your traps for your enemies' goodness; ye shall find that better than his badness that ye arouse and challenge! Ye fools without subtlety—ye burners of the roots of growing goodness! Know ye not that an enemy's change of heart toward you is as timid as the voles, whose little snouts peep forth from hiding and vanish?

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

CASWALLON returned to the forest battlefield to count Norse prisoners and to look after wounded Britons, without speaking again to Tros. Even Orwic only waved a noncommittal farewell, and Tros was left alone with two ships, fifteen prisoners, and only Conops to help him manage them. The twenty hired seamen had returned from over-river, but they were certain to be enemies, not friends.

The seamen demanded weapons, intimating that the prisoners might make a break for liberty; but their own only reason for staying was that Tros had not paid them, and he more than suspected they would try to pay themselves if provided with more than their own short, seamen's knives.

Even unarmed they were deadly unreliable; Caswallon's men who had gone down the riverbank in pursuit of the one boat load of Northmen that escaped Tros's arrow-fire would be sure to pass news along, so it would be only a matter of time before scores of longshore pirates would come hurrying in hope of loot.

Tros's hirelings would help them strip away everything portable, after which they would probably burn both ships in a wanton passion of destruction.

Meanwhile, tide was flowing; both ships lay fast on the mud, no hope of moving either of them until long after dark. The druids carried wounded and dead ashore; chariots arrived, as by a miracle, from nowhere and galloped away with their burden around a clump of trees and over the skyline.

There was no road in that direction, therefore, no prospect of assistance; the tracks of wheels cut in the turf were new, nearly at right angles to the riverbank, and not even approximately parallel to the direction from which the chariots had arrived.

To reach Lunden would take several hours of drifting, and the distance very likely was too great for one tide, which would have to rise to three-quarters of its flow before it could lift the ships; and even so, the bireme would have to be pumped out.

So Tros took a course few men would have dared to take; he returned their weapons to his prisoners, and brought them all up on the bireme's poop, where they could have overwhelmed him easily. He could not understand their speech, nor they his; there was only Helma to act interpreter, and her smile proved that she understood Tros's predicament. Her words confirmed it:

"I have pledged no friendship!"

"Have I asked it?" Tros demanded, staring at her. He felt inclined to box her ears, hardly knew why he refrained.

Her eyes challenged his, but Tros seized the upper hand of her abruptly:

"Make me a bandage for this cut on my cheek!"

"There is Zorn's wife!"

"I commanded you."

He pointed to a box of loosely woven linen stuff that the druids had left on the deck.

"Very well."

She smiled in a way that implied a threat, which Tros perfectly understood; he had heard that the Norse women were adept with poison.

"Tell a seaman to carry it here," she added; and for the space of ten more seconds she defied him.

"You fetch it."

Tros's amber eyes met hers more steadily than any man's had ever done, and there was that behind them that Fflur had called the "ancient wisdom," although Tros was only conscious of it as determination; he knew he must master this woman or lose control of all his prisoners. Far more than Sigurdsen, her brother, she was the pivot of opinion, although her brother doubtless thought he ruled the clan.

Suddenly she made a mock curtsey and went down on deck to bring the bandages, carrying the box back on her head as if she were a bond-woman, avoiding the eyes of her own folk, artfully obliging them to see that Tros was making her a menial.

But Tros sat down on the up-turned arrow-basket and submitted his face to be bandaged as if he had noticed nothing, pulling off the heavy gold band that encircled his forehead and tossing it from hand to hand while she opened his wound with her fingers and sponged it. She understood him.

That gold band, though it might hang too loosely on her neck if he should place it there, would be a mark of servitude forever. There were letters and symbols graven on it, and although she could not read them she had no doubt they were his name and title.

She could not make a bandage stay in place without wrapping folds of linen under his jaw and around his forehead, so he could not replace the band when she had finished. He gave it to her to hold for him and three of the Northmen made comments that brought blushes to her cheek. She answered savagely, tongue-lashing them to silence. Tros turned his back on her and roared to the hired seamen to man the water-hoist.

Mutiny—instant and unequivocal. Maybe the bandage and the absence of the gold band made him look less like a king. The coolness toward him of Caswallon's men had had effect, too; and none knew better than those hirelings that longshore pirates would arrive ere long.

Why labor at the hoist when they would need their strength for looting presently, and for carrying away the loot to villages up-river? The tousle-headed, ragged, skin-clad gang defied him noisily, and Conops hurled a wooden belaying pin at the head of the nearest.

But the pin was hardly more abrupt than Tros. He left the poop, cloak flying in the wind, like a great bird swooping down on them, seizing the heads of two and beating them against a third, discarding those—they lay unconscious on the deck—hurling a fourth man broadside into half a dozen of his friends, and pouncing on the ringleader, who had been captain of a vessel of his own until Tros hired him. Tros twisted an arm behind his back until he yelled, then rubbed his nose along the beam of the water-hoist, leaving a smear of blood the length of it.

"Man that beam or eat it!" he commanded. "I will chop and stuff it down your throats if there's a drop of water in the bilge at sunset, or one back-word from one of you meanwhile!"

So they went to work and Tros rolled the three unconscious men toward the trough until the outpour drenched their heads and they recovered, when he cuffed and shoved them toward the beam and they began to labor at it, too dazed to know what they were doing. Then, returning to the poop, he grinned at Sigurdsen, not glancing at Helma but signing to her to come near and interpret.

"Did you build your longship, Sigurdsen?"

The Northman nodded. He was sunk deep in the northern gloom and too dispirited to use his voice.

"Who did the labor? These?"

Sigurdsen nodded again, but a trace of pride betrayed itself as he glanced at his fellow-prisoners.

"I—I taught them all," he grunted.

"Good! Then bid them caulk this bireme from the inside as the water leaves the hold; use linen, clothing, frayed rope, anything, so be she floats to Lunden, where we'll beach her in the mud."

"Your ship is no good," Sigurdsen said gloomily.

"Hah! But her beak sunk Volstrum," Tros retorted. "She has some virtues. We will pick her as the crows pick a horse's ribs, and you and I will build a ship together that shall out-sail all of them."

Sigurdsen stared—hardly believed his ears—grinned at last, coming out of his gloom to order his men to work, with the three women to help them unravel rope to stuff into the leaking seams. But Tros bade Helma stay there on the poop; and when Conops had found rope and cloth enough, and the hammering began below deck, he stood in front of her, folding his arms on his breast.

She supposed he intended to use her again as interpreter between himself and Sigurdsen and made ready to accept that duty willingly enough; it made her feel indispensable and the earlier look of ironic challenge returned into her eyes. But Tros surprised her.

"Can you cook?" he demanded.

She nodded, stung, indignant.

"Then do it. These Britons have rotted my belly with cindered deer-meat until poison would taste like golden oranges from Joppa. Go. The cook-house is in the citadel. I hunger. Cook enough for sixteen people."

Her eyelids trembled, brimming with indignant tears, but she bit her lip and not a tear fell. She held out Tros's gold forehead-band.

"Keep it," he said, "for your wages."

That chance thrust brought tears at last; she choked a sob. Tros knew then that he had conquered her, although her friendship might be yet to win, and deadlier than her anger.

"I don't work for wages," she blurted.

There was more passion in her voice than when she had screamed to Sigurdsen while the fight waged on the poop. She could endure to be a prisoner, to fetch and carry for her brother's conqueror; but as one whose "fathers were kings when ice first closed in on the North and it was dark at noonday," death looked better than earned money.

"Keep it as my gift then," Tros retorted with an air of huge indifference.

"No!"

She thrust the thing toward him and, since he would not take it, flung it at his feet, then, sobbing, hurried down the ladder and disappeared into the citadel, whence smoke presently emerged.

Tros did not want to talk to Sigurdsen; he wanted to think. It suited him best to have no interpreter at hand. Sigurdsen, whose wounds were painful, soused his bandages with water and lay down in a corner of the poop, his eyes alight with fever.

Tros leaned against the rail, facing the riverbank, whence long-shore plunderers might come, yet thinking less of them than of the blue-eyed, fair-haired Helma. She annoyed him. He was vaguely restless at the thought of having to provide for her. Some spark of tyranny within him, not yet gritted out against the rocks of destiny, stirred him toward cruelty, and it was blended with an instinct to defend himself against all women's wiles.

The custom of the whole known world, as regarded prisoners, was even more rigid and compulsory than written law. He, Tros, was answerable for the fate of fifteen people; they were his property, to do with as he pleased, dependent on him, obliged to be obedient on penalty of death, their only remaining right, that of looking to him for protection.

He might set them free, but if he did so, Caswallon, should he see fit, could punish him for succoring and aiding public enemies. If he should keep them in Lunden, it would probably be months before the Britons would begin to treat them civilly; they would be in danger of mob violence.

Yet, if he should imprison them their usefulness would vanish; they would cease to feel beholden to himself and would either seek to escape or else intrigue against him with any personal enemy who might evolve out of the political tangle.

Britain was full of rival factions; hundreds of Northmen had found shelter and prosperity in Britain by lending themselves to one faction or another. and these new prisoners might find friends easily enough.

The probability was that Caswallon had met with political trouble during Tros's absence; some aspirant for power very likely had accused him of assisting Tros with provisions and men at a time when the tribe could ill afford it.

If Caswallon's power were in jeopardy the chief would be a fool not to consider his own interests and might even feel compelled to show him enmity. Skell, who was of Norse extraction and a natural born treason-monger, might easily enough have stirred such disaffection as would shake Caswallon's chieftainship.

The long and the short of all that was, Tros needed friends, and the only available possible friends in sight were his Northmen prisoners, whose gratitude he proposed to earn and keep. Not that he placed much faith in gratitude—at any rate, not too much.

Homeless men, beaten in battle and reduced to the status of serfs, can hardly be blamed for disloyalty if offered opportunity to regain independence.

Tros began to wonder just to what extent he himself was morally beholden to Caswallon. He even meditated taking the longship, which, having the lighter draft, would be first off the mud, and sailing down-Thames with his Northmen to seek safety on the Belgian coast. His only reason for dismissing the idea was his obligation to bury his father with proper obsequies.

He was particularly thoughtful about the young girl, Helma. Instinct told him to beware of her, to give her no chance to ensnare him, to treat her with less than courtesy; intuition—which is as different from instinct as black from white—warned him that she was a friend worth winning, but that nothing could be won by a display of weakness.

Tros was no horseman, but he had picked up British terms from Orwic.

"She's a finely bred mare that must be broke before she'll handle," he reflected, grinning slyly at the smoke emerging through the cook-house window, grinning again as he thought of his lack of experience with women.

He wondered to whom he should marry her, the only ultimate solution that occurred to him. And while he thought of that, a boat came up the river, paddled furiously by eight men, keeping to the far bank to avoid the flowing tide, but crossing on a long slant presently and making straight for the two ships. A man sat in the stern whose features seemed vaguely familiar—a man in a fever of haste, who shifted restlessly and scolded at the straining crew.

"Skell!" Tros muttered. "Impudence—infinity—the two are one!"

He started for the arrow-engine, but thought better of it; he could deal with Skell single-handed, and there was Conops to help; the boat's crew were longshore Britons, of the type that might murder unarmed men, but would scamper away at the first threat of serious fighting, men of the sort that had been serfs for generations.

Skell came hand-over-hand uninvited up the ladder on the bireme's stern, and stood still on the poop with his back to the rail, surveying the scene, his foxy eyes avoiding Tros and his restless hands keeping ostentatiously clear of the sword and dagger he wore.

His fox-red beard was newly trimmed, and he wore good Gaulish clothes under a smock of dressed brown-stained deer-hide that came to his knees. He would have looked too well dressed if it had not been for the stains of travel.

"Tros," he said, meeting his eyes suddenly, "you and I should cease enmity. I did you a little harm, and you had revenge. Cæsar can employ us both, and I have word for you from Cæsar."

"Speak it," Tros answered.

He despised Skell, but he was not fool enough to shut his ears to news.

Skell might be Cæsar's man in theory, but a child could tell by his expression that it was Skell's advantage he was seeking first and last. He paused, picking words, and Tros had time to wonder how far such a reader of men's minds as Cæsar actually trusted him.

"I heard of these Northmen. They attacked Hythe," Skell said presently, "and I came overland to the Thames in hope of getting word with them, for I heard they were making for Lunden. I would have persuaded them to cross to Gaul with me and talk with Cæsar. Cæsar could have used such allies as these."

Tros nodded. Cæsar would ally himself with any one to turn an adversary's flank, and would reduce the ally to subjection afterward. But had Cæsar had time to say so much to Skell? Tros thought not; it was likelier that Skell was speculating on his own account.

"I met Britons down-river who told me you had sunk Volstrum's ship and captured this one," Skell went on, glancing repeatedly at the Northman who lay ten feet away from him clutching with fevered fingers at the haft of his great ax. "And I happen to know, Tros, that Caswallon has been turned against you by a new intrigue. Believe me, I know that surely."

"Aye," Tros answered, "none should know better than the man who managed the intrigue."

Skell laughed; it began like a fox-bark but ended in a cackle like an old hen's; there was no more mirth in it than comes of greed and insincerity. But there was a note, that had nothing to do with mirth, which set Tros studying the fear in Skell's eyes.

"That is true, Tros," Skell went on. "I sent a message to Caswallon. I brought a woman from Gaul with me, one of Cæsar's light o' loves. She will make all Britain too hot to hold you! But Cæsar thinks, and I think, you are a man of sense. Cæsar bade me win you over to his side, if I can. The Britons have turned against you, Tros."

Tros grinned. He grinned like an ogre. Mirth oozed from him.

"Hah! Go and tell your new master, Skell, that I have his bireme and his gold. I gave him a cold swim at Seine-mouth, sunk his boats, drowned his men and wrecked his fleet! Say that is all preliminary. Tell him I'm minded to make friends with him at about the time of the Greek Calends! Cæsar will know what that means, he talks Greek very well."

"Would you care to trust me?" Skell asked.

"No," said Tros.

"Because," Skell continued, as if he had not noticed the refusal, "for my part I would rather trust you than Cæsar or the Britons. I have lived my life in Britain, but my father was Norse and I feel among these Britons like a fish on land. As for Cæsar—"

"He is another alien, like me," said Tros. "He and you were not bred under the same stars. Nor was I."

"Cæsar is playing Cæsar's hand," Skell answered. "He would use you and me, and then forget us."

"He shall never forget me," Tros remarked with conviction, grinning again hugely.

"I see you like Cæsar no more than I do," Skell began again; but Tros's laugh interrupted him.

"Like Cæsar? I admire him more than all the kings I ever met. He is the greatest of Romans. Compared to him, Skell, you are a rat that gnaws holes in a rotten ship! Cæsar is a scoundrel on a grand scale—a gentleman who measures continents, a gold-and-scarlet liar whom you can't understand, you, who would tell lies just because your belly ached!"

Skell looked a mite bewildered, but Tros's grin was good-natured, so he tried again:

"Let bygones be, Tros. I am no such fool as to believe in Cæsar's friendship; I would sooner trust you, though you call me liar to my face. Why not pretend with me to be Cæsar's catspaws, and snatch out a nice fortune for ourselves?"

Tros stroked his beard reflectively. It formed no part of his philosophy to refuse to make use of a rascal, provided he could keep his own hands clean. Skell was a mere pawn in fortune's game, not like Cæsar, who used fortune for his mistress and debauched her with cynical assurance. There was nothing to be gained by trusting Skell, but not much sense in incurring his spite; better to kill him and have done with it than to cultivate his enmity, and Tros preferred never to kill if he could help it.

"You are afraid to go to Lunden?" he suggested, by way of plumbing Skell's thoughts.

Skell was about to answer when the door of the cook-house opened and the blue-eyed Helma came carrying a wooden dish of wheat and meat, her eyes fixed on it for fear of spilling. Skell whistled softly to himself.

"That girl is no serving wench!" he remarked, eyeing the amber shoulder-ornaments and the gold wire on her girdle.

He seemed amused, and before Tros could prevent him he was speaking to her in the Norse tongue, she standing still because she could not carry the dish and look upward at the poop. What he said did not please her; Tros noticed that.

Skell jumped down from the poop and took the dish from her, holding it while she climbed the ladder and then reaching up to set it on the poop edge; she had lifted it again in both hands and was facing Tros before Skell could climb up behind her.

She appeared to be trying to shame Tros by her meekness, she a sea-king's daughter and he making her cook and fetch and carry. But Tros curtly bade her set the dish down, sniffing, for he could smell the stuff was burned.

"What did Skell say?" he demanded, glaring at Skell across her shoulder, silently daring him to interrupt.

"Does it matter what he says?" she retorted. "He is neither fish nor bird, a Briton who talks Norse."

"Tell me," Tros insisted.

She turned and looked at Skell, and it appeared that her contempt for him offset her indignation at Tros's bruskness.

"He said I should look to him for friendship."

"So!" said Tros. "Sit down then, Skell, and eat with us. I would like to hear more about friendship. Ho there, Conops! Come and eat, and bring the Northmen. Bid those Britons lay off pumping for an hour, unless the water makes too fast. Give them bread and dry meat."

The giant Sigurdsen refused food, although Helma tried to tempt him, but the other Northmen came and sprawled on deck, crowding the women away from the dish. Tros sent Conops for another plate and heaped food on it for Sigurdsen's wife and the widow, but he made Helma sit beside him, whereat Skell laughed.

"She will not eat with the men," he explained.

"She will obey," Tros retorted, and then listened curiously while the Northmen sang a grace of some kind, a melancholy chant that had the dirge of seas in it and something of the roll of thunder.

When they had done he added a sunlit, wine-suggestive verse in Greek, being ever respectful of other men's religions.

For a while they ate enormously, using their fingers, Tros stuffing food into Helma's mouth until she laughed and had to yield, with her face all smeared with gravy. But the laughter brought tears to her eyes, and she only kept on eating because Tros insisted; shame at being made to eat with men was swallowed by a greater grief, and Tros began to pity her in his own bull-hearted way.

"Your brother Sigurdsen has made choice and cast in his lot with me. These other Northmen have no choice, but are my men henceforth. Now you shall choose," he told her. "There is Skell, and here am I. Whose fortune will you follow? I will give you to Skell if you wish."

Her scorn for Skell was so intense she almost spat at him.

"That half-breed!" she sneered. "You may bestow me where you will, Tros, for that is your right. But I will not die, I will live to see you writhe in ruin if you treat me as less than a king's daughter! I have heard you are a prince's son, so I submit to you, although I hate you. If I should have to bear your children, they shall be a shame to me but a pride to you."

Tros laid his huge hand on her shoulder.

"Peace!" he ordered.

Talk of that kind was as foreign to him as the Northmen's language that contained no word he understood. He was more perplexed about the girl than ever, utterly unable to imagine what to do with her. Abruptly, gruffly, he changed the subject.

"Tell us this plan of yours, Skell. How would she and you make use of me? What is your friendship worth to her?"

Skell tried to grin ingratiatingly. Since he had eaten Tros's food he had no fear of violence; the laws of hospitality were rigid; it was greater sin to break them than to steal or to seduce a neighbor's wife, and unless Tros were willing to incur contempt of the meanest slave in Britain he would have to let Skell get clear before resuming enmity.

"Cæsar might love her!" Skell answered slyly. "Cæsar likes them young and well-bred. Why not send her to Cæsar to love him awhile and make your peace with him?"

"Who is Cæsar?" asked Helma, cheeks reddening.

"He will be emperor of all the world, unless I succeed against him better than the last two times," Tros answered. "Cæsar and I are as fire and water, but as to which is which you must judge for yourself. I hate him as you hate me, young woman. Do you understand that?"

She actually laughed. Her whole face lighted with a new humor that transformed it.

"Cæsar might like you if you would let him," she answered, and then looked away.

"What else?" asked Tros, staring straight at Skell.

"Did I speak of one of Cæsar's light o' loves?" Skell answered. "The woman crossed from Gaul with me, in a boat that lost its mast almost within hail of your bireme. Take my advice and be rid of this one before that one casts her hooks into your heart! Put this one to a wise use."

"The woman's name?" asked Tros.

"She was named Cartisfindda, but the Romans changed it to Cornelia. She carried Cæsar's message to Glendwyr the Briton. Glendwyr plots against Caswallon, is ready to pounce at the first chance. You understand now? Cæsar can use you or ruin you. You and I and a handful of Northmen to help Glendwyr—man! We can help ourselves to the loot of Lunden Town! For a beginning I say, send this girl to Cæsar with your compliments."

Tros looked hard at Helma. There was laughter in his eyes, but Skell could not see that because he sat at Tros's right hand.

"Will you go?" he asked her.

"As your enemy?" she answered. "Yes!"

"Nay, I have enemies enough in Cæsar's camp," said Tros. "Did you hear her, Skell? You must think of another means of making use of me."

But it had occurred to him he might make use of Skell. "Are you afraid to come to Lunden?"

Skell looked frightened. For a moment he seemed to fear Tros might take him against his will, until he remembered that the ships were on the mud and he was Tros's guest, safe from violence.

"I am a stranger to all fear," he answered.

And he could look the part; he would have deceived a man who did not know him.

But the truth was Skell was so full of fear that he could be trusted to change his plan at any moment and never to tell the truth where he had opportunity to weave a lie. His was the dread that makes misers and all meanness. He felt himself a toad beneath the harrow of misfortune, who could never afford to keep faith because of the initial handicap with which he started out in life.

He could recognize honesty—none more readily than he—but only to try to take advantage of it; none less than he could cope with subtlety that uses truth for bait and candid explanations for a trap. But subtlety of that sort was Tros's instinctive weapon.

"Skell," he said, "you are a scoundrel who would slit your friend's throat for a woman's favor. I am not your friend; I have but one throat and I need it! I hope you are Cæsar's friend; yet I would hate to see a man like Cæsar brought to his end by a cur like you. However, that is Cæsar's problem and not mine."

Skell tried to look offended, but in his heart he felt flattered, as the smile in his eyes betrayed. Tros noticed that and continued in the same vein of frankness:

"My difficulty, Skell, is this: that I have fed you. Therefore, you are my guest, and though I know you would never hesitate to kill me, if you could do it without danger, I dare not offend the gods by killing you. Therefore, I must make terms with you. But a bargain has two sides. I am minded you shall come to Lunden."

"Why?" demanded Skell.

"Because I like to have my enemies where I can see them."

"And if I will not come?"

"You are afraid to come. You fear Caswallon. You know Caswallon knows you have intrigued with Cæsar. Yet you would like to go to Lunden because your house is there, and there are men who owe you money, whom you would like to press for payment.

"However, it may be that lure is not strong enough, so I will add this: Am I a man of my word, Skell? Yes? You are sure of that? Then listen: if you refuse to come to Lunden I will spend, if I must, as much as half of Cæsar's money that became mine when I took this bireme. I will spend it in cooking your goose for you!

"I will set Caswallon by the ears about you. And if all else fails me, I will seek you out and slay you with my own sword, much though it would irk me to defile good steel in such a coward's heart! Do you believe me?"

"And if I come to Lunden?" Skell inquired.

He was smiling. He enjoyed to talk of the issues of life and death when there was no presently impending danger.

"Then I will concede this: I will not move hand or tongue against you while you do the same by me. I will tell Caswallon you are a harmless rogue whose bark is far worse than his bite, for, as the gods are all around us, Skell, that is my honest judgment of you.

"I will tell Caswallon you have done us all a service, for that is true: Unless you had gone to Gaul in the hope of betraying me to Cæsar, I could never have annoyed the Roman there at Seinemouth.

"Skell, I almost captured him. So I will beg Caswallon to ignore your treachery; and if he should refuse, I will protect you with my own guest-privilege."

Skell meditated that for a while. His foxy, iron eyes kept shifting from face to face, avoiding Tros but constantly returning to study Helma, who was kneeling beside Sigurdsen, aiding his distracted wife to soak the stiffening bandages.

"I mistrust your words," Skell said at last. "You are a man who keeps a bargain, but you bind one craftily and I suspect a trick. You must swear to me that there is nothing hidden in those terms of yours."

"Not I," Tros answered. "I expect to make my profit. So do you, Skell. I will change no word of the agreement. Either you come to Lunden, subject to my stipulation, or you go your own way and I will rid the earth of you as swiftly as that first duty can be done. Now choose—for I hear oars—and the tide is turning."

Skell also heard oars, thumping steadily downstream toward the bireme.

"I agree!" he said, snapping his mouth shut, looking bold and almost carefree; but Tros's amber eyes discerned the nervousness that underlay that mask.

Conops whispered in Tros's ear. Tros stood and glanced over the stern.

"Druids," he said, and began straightening his garments to receive them with proper dignity. "They will be coming for my father's body. Heh! But Caswallon is a true host, friendship or no friendship. See in what state the druids come!"

CHAPTER XXXII

"A PRETTY DECENT SORT OF GOD!"

Ye who look for a profit from a friendship, ye are ten times overpaid before a reckoning begins. Ye are thieves, and in the day of reckoning your lot shall be betrayal and humiliation. Friendship is free, and its gifts are as free as the sunlight that demands no recompense. Otherwise it is not friendship, but bait within a hidden trap. They are not gifts, wherein the hooks of avarice lie hidden.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

The druids sang as they approached the bireme. In the bow of a long barge, under a bower of yew-branches, there stood an ancient of days, bald-headed, a white beard flowing to his waist, a golden sickle in his girdle, his white robe touching sandals laced with golden thongs.

He led the chant; young voices in the stern caroled joyful, almost bird-like, regular responses; fourteen rowers droned a harmonied accompaniment, pulsing to the rhythm of the gilded oars. Serenely, solemnly they hymned the ever-nearness of eternity; there was not one note of grief.

The barge was draped in purple cloth and the rowers wore sleeveless purple tunics over their white smocks. They who stood singing in the stern were robed, like the ancient in the bow, in white from head to foot; and all, rowers included, wore wreaths of mistletoe.

In the midst of the barge, between the rowers, was a platform draped in white with a wide gold border, and over that a canopy was raised on gilded rods. The sides of the barge were white, adorned with gilded scroll-work.

The rowers tossed oars and the barge swung to a standstill under the bireme's stern; but the chant continued. Tros and his prisoners stood respectfully, Olaf Sigurdsen supporting himself on the shoulders of two men; the Northmen's lips moved as if they were trying to fit their own familiar words to druid music, that stirred their pagan hearts as only battle and the North Sea storms and elemental mysteries could ever do.

Skell kept covering his face nervously; some half-familiar phantom had returned to haunt his brain. The women, except Helma, sobbed as if the sobbing brought relief to tortured heart-strings; but she stood still, beside Tros, brave-eyed, almost glistening with emotions that not she herself could have explained.

Her shoulder touched Tros's arm and he could feel a thrill that made his flesh creep pleasantly. He drew his arm away.

The hireling Britons at the water-hoist ceased work and stood by the bulwark. Conops, irreverent and practical, threw a rope over the stern, but the druids ignored it; they held the barge to the bireme with gilded boat-hooks while two of the rowers drove long poles into the river-bed to serve for an anchor at either end.

Then they raised a wooden ladder with bronze hooks that caught the bireme's stern rail, and up that the old High Druid came, pausing at every step to roll out his majestic hymn and wait for the response. He came over the taffrail, singing, moving his right hand in centuries-old ritual, as calmly as if that were a temple threshhold. He hardly touched Tros's proffered arm as he stepped down to the poop.

There, eyes on the horizon, he stood booming his hymn to eternity until eight druids followed him over the stern. He needed no advice from Tros; Caswallon must have told him where the greater-than-a-druid's body was that he had come to bear away with ancient honors.

He strode forward, and down the short ladder to the deck, the other druids keeping step behind him; and when Tros, summoning all his dignity, swung himself down to the deck to open the cabin door and show the way, a druid motioned him aside. They let no uninitiated hand have part, let no untaught eye see the rites they entered to fulfil, let none but druids hear their whispered liturgy.

Two druids stood outside the door, their backs to it, lips moving, signifying with a nod to Tros that he should keep his distance.

So Tros stood, leaning on his drawn sword, his head bowed, until they came forth at last bearing the body between them. It was no longer covered with Cæsar's scarlet cloak, but robed in druid's garments under a purple sheet and laid on a gilded stretcher.

The old High Druid swayed ahead of the procession, chanting. They ascended the poop-ladder, hardly pausing, skilfully passing the stretcher from hand to hand so that the body they honored was always feet first, always horizontal, paused on the poop to chant a changed refrain, then descended the ladder to the barge, with the rear end of the stretcher hung in slings, and no commotion or mismovement to disturb the dead man's dignity.

The chanting rose to a higher melody, as if they welcomed a warrior home, when they laid the body on the platform in the barge's midst. Then the old High Druid took his stand beneath the canopy; the rowers cast off from the anchor-poles; the barge moved out into the stream, and to a new chant, wilder and more wonderful, the oarsmen swung in unison, until they vanished in a crimson glow of sunset between autumn-tinted oaks, up-river.

Then, Tros broke silence.

"Thus, not otherwise, a soul goes forth," he said. "None knoweth whither. They bear it forth; and there are They who shall receive it."

He spoke Greek; only Conops could have understood the words, and Conops' senses were all occupied in watching Skell and Helma, trying to guess what mischief they were brewing. Quietly he plucked Tros's sleeve, whispering:

"Master, better give me leave to kill that sly-eyed fox! Coax him forward to the cook-house. Slip the knife in back of his ear. As for the woman—"

He did not offer to kill the woman; he was thrifty; he knew her value.

"—whip her. Whip her now, before she thinks you easy and does you a damage! Take my advice, master, or she will cook a mischief for you quicker than she burned the stew."

The sun went down; and in a haze of purple twilight Tros drew Helma to the starboard rail, backing her against it.

"What did Skell say this time?" he demanded.

Conops was listening, hand on knife-hilt, watching Skell, who leaned over the far rail whistling to himself. The hireling seamen having pumped the bireme dry had gone to the bow, where they were half-invisible, like phantoms herded in the gloom. The tide was rising fast; the broken oars between the ships already creaked to the longship's motion, but the bireme was still hard and fast.

Helma laughed mirthlessly, but she seemed to have recovered something of her former spirit.

"You are arrogant, and I obey you, Tros, but I don't know for how long. Skell says you are among enemies in Britain. He says they will not let you keep your prisoners or the longship. He bade me notice how the druids said no word to you."

Tros laughed. He knew the druids took no part in personal disputes, not interfering much in politics. The same law governed all their ceremony; nothing was allowed to interrupt it.

"Go on," he said. "What was Skell's proposal?"

"Skell said, if I go with you I shall be sold in open market by Caswallon's order."

Tros knew that Skell knew better. Even should Caswallon claim the prisoners despite his recent gift of them to Tros, he could not dispose of them like cattle without incurring the wrath of the druids and the scorn of the whole countryside. But it was a likely enough lie for Skell to tell to a prisoner, who might not know the British customs, though she could speak the tongue.

"So what did Skell suggest?"

"He said the Britons will come and loot these ships. They will kill the men and seize us women. Skell said, if I obey him, he will protect me and take me to Gaul."

Tros whistled softly, nodding to himself. There was no hurry; the longship floated; he could move her whenever he chose. Meanwhile, Skell had broken the guest-law, and he had excuse to kill him or to kick him overboard. Conops read his gesture, took a step toward Skell, drawing his knife eight gleaming inches from the sheath.

"Stay!"

Tros seized him by the shoulder. It was a dangerous game to deal roughly with a guest in Britain. Skell had eaten from Tros's dish by invitation; all the crew had seen it. A prisoner's word that Skell had voided privilege could carry no weight against a free man's unless given under torture.

"What answer did you make to Skell?" he demanded, turning, but keeping hold of Conops' shoulder.

The girl laughed, mirthlessly again. "I would liefer die beside my brother than go, a half-breed's property, to Cæsar."

"Come here, Skell!" Tros commanded.

But he spoke too suddenly, too fiercely. There was a splash as Skell sprang overside. Then Tros's ears caught what Skell probably had heard first—song and splashing in the distance, downstream. He thought of the arrow-engine but refrained and pushed Conops away from it. Conops urged, but Tros knew his own mind.

"Let the rat run. I have a notion not to kill him."

"Notion!" Conops muttered. "I've a notion, too. We'll all be gutted by pirates, that's my notion!"

Skell's boat left the bireme's side in response to his shouts, and the Britons who had brought him hauled him out of the water. Straight away he set them paddling toward the farther bank, where he could lurk in shadow out of sight of the approaching boats, whose crews sang drunkenly and splashed enough for a considerable fleet. But there was no moon, no stars, only the ghostly British gloaming deeply shadowed, and Tros could not see them yet.

"Into the longship," he commanded. "All hands!"

The hirelings in the bow demurred. They knew the time was come for looting. Tros charged them, beat them overside with the flat of his sword. Conops cut the lashings that held the ships together. There was no talk needed to persuade the Northmen to flee from drunken longshoremen; they were overside before Tros could count their flitting shadows, and Tros had hardly time to run for Cæsar's cloak before the longship yielded to the tide and drifted out into the river.

For a while he let her drift and listened. He could still hardly see the approaching boats, but it was evident that their occupants had seen the longship's movement; they had stopped and were holding a consultation, paddling to keep their craft from drifting nearer until they could decide what the movement meant.

There was no wind; the longship lay helpless on the tide, useless unless Tros could set his prisoners to work and make the hirelings help them; and if he should put the Northmen to the oars there would be none to help him repel boarders.

Yet there was no knowing what the end might be if he should employ his prisoners to defend a ship that had been theirs a dozen hours ago. They, too, might force the hirelings to the oars and make a bid for freedom. He had given them back their weapons; they could overwhelm him easily.

But out of the darkness down the river movement grew again. The Britons were advancing on the bireme, keeping silence. It was more than Tros could stomach to see pirates loot a valuable ship.

"Oars!" he commanded in a low voice. "Out oars!"

Conops leaped into the ship's waist, clawing, cuffing, beating with his knife-hilt, until presently a dozen hirelings manned the benches, the remainder hugging bruises in the dark.

"Too few!" Tros muttered.

Unused to those oars and that ship, a dozen men could hardly have provided steerage way against the tide. He could count nearly a dozen boats creeping close up to the bireme.

"Helma!" he commanded, turning his head to look for her.

The Northmen, except Sigurdsen, who lay murmuring in delirium, stood and grinned at him. Helma was behind them, urging something, speaking Norse in sibilant undertones.

"Helma!" he said again; and his hand went to his sword, for the Northmen's grins were overbold.

One of them was arguing with Helma, with what sounded like monstrous oaths.

"To your oars!" he ordered, gesturing.

None obeyed. He seized the nearest Northman, hurled him into the ship's waist, spun around again to fight for dear life, drawing sword and lunging as he turned.

"Hold, Tros!"

That was Helma's voice. Ears were swifter than his eyes; he heard her in mid-lunge and checked barely in time to let a man give ground in front of him. Helma sprang to his side then, seized his sword-hilt in both hands, bearing down on it, screaming at the prisoners in Norse.

He understood she was fighting for him, scolding, screaming at her kinsmen to obey and man the oars. He caught the word Sigurdsen two or three times. She was invoking her brother's name.

Suddenly she let go Tros's sword and fairly drove the Northmen down in front of her, hurling imprecations at them, then watched Tros, watched what he would do, stood back in silence as he strode toward the helm, laughed when he seized it and stood at gaze, his left hand raised over his head ready to signal the rowers.

The longship had drifted away from the bireme stern-first and was now nearly beam to the tide. He signaled to the port-oars first, to straighten her, then tried three strokes, both sides together, to feel what strength and speed he could command. The tide was strong, but they could move her better than he hoped, and he headed half a dozen easy strokes inshore where there was more or less slack water, due to reeds and lily-pads.

He could count nine boats now nosing toward the bireme. Two or three had disappeared, inshore probably. They were creeping cautiously as if expecting ambush. As their noses touched the bireme's shadow Tros shouted, bringing down his left hand:

"Row! Yo-ho!-Yo-ho! Yo-ho!"

The longship leaped. Before the Britons in the boats could guess what the shout portended, a high prow, notched against the sky, came boiling down on them, jerking to the strain of ash oars as Conops beat time with a rope's end on the hirelings' backs. Three boats backed away in time; but six crowded ones were caught by the longship's prow, swept sidewise between the ships and crushed against the bireme's hull.

There were screams, and a splintering crash, grinding of broken timber, oaths, confusion in the longship where the rowers on the port side fell between the benches, a long, ululating cry from Helma and the longship swung alone down-river with a boiling helm as Tros threw all his weight against the steering oar.

"Now again!" he shouted, laughing. "Easier this time—with the tide."

But the rowers needed minutes to recover equilibrium and breath. There were two men knocked unconscious by their own oar-handles. It took time to swing the longship, head upstream. Tros roared his orders, Helma screamed interpretation of them; Conops plied the rope's end; but before the longship could be headed on her course again Tros saw the remnant of the fleet of boats scoot out of the bireme's shadow and race for the riverbank.

"Easy! Easy all!" he shouted; and again Helma studied him curiously, puckering her eyes to see his face more clearly in the gloom.

There were thumps, oaths, commotion in the ship's waist, where Conops fought three Britons. Unwisely they had sprung out of the darkness from behind to pay him for the rope's end, but they missed with their first onslaught, so the outcome was inevitable and Tros paid no attention to that minor detail. He was studying the bireme, measuring with his eye the height of water up her side. She was still heeled just a trifle, bow-end firmly on the mud.

But there were noises along the shadowy, marshy shoreline. Owls, half a dozen of them, rose into the night and vanished with the weird, swift flight that signified they were afraid of something. Presently sparks, then a blaze, then a whirl of red fire as a man waved a torch to get it properly alight.

Torch after torch was lighted from the first one, until the darkness fifty yards back from the river line grew aglow with smoky crimson. The commotion in the ship's waist ceased and Conops came aft, leaning elbows on the low poop-deck.

"All ready, master," he said calmly; but he was breathing hard, and he snuffled because his nose was bleeding.

"Find a warp and and come up here," Tros ordered.

Conops disappeared again. Tros sang a "Yo-ho" song to time the oarsmen, giving just sufficient way to bring the ships abreast. Then, backing port-oars with the aid of Helma's voice, he swung the longship's stern until it almost touched the bireme. Conops appeared then, dragging a wet rope, cursing its religion in outrageous longshore Levantine—which was a mixture of a dozen languages. Helma pounced on it and helped him haul, her muscles cracking like a firebrand.

"Jump and make fast!"

Conops nearly missed, for the longship's stern was swinging. But he had tied a small rope to the heavy warp and tied that to his waist, so he had two hands to clutch the bireme's stern. He clambered up it like a monkey and hauled the warp after him, Helma paying out the coils as the longship drifted away, beam to the tide, Tros straightening her with slow dips of the port-oars.

"Make fast!"

Helma, sea-king's daughter to the marrow of her young bones, took three turns around an oaken bollard in the stern and held that until the warp began to feel the strain, paying out a foot or two until vibration ceased, before she made fast to the other bollard.

"Both banks—way!" Tros thundered and began his "Yo-ho" song, while Helma beat time and the mud boiled blue around them.

But the bireme stuck fast, though the longship swung and swayed, heeling to one side or the other as the humming warp took the strain to port or starboard. Conops yelled suddenly. A torch came curving out of darkness to the bireme's deck, followed by yells from the longshore Britons as Conops caught that one and tossed it overboard. Then another torch, and another.

"Row! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!"

The ash oars bent and the rowers sweated in the dark. Helma ran between the benches, whirling a rope's end, beating the Britons' backs. No need to urge the Northmen; they were working for dear life, whereas the Britons were in favor of the longshore pirates.

Tros labored at the helm to keep the longship straight and haul the bireme off the mud at the same angle that she struck. But the warp hummed and nothing happened, except that torch followed torch so fast that Conops could hardly toss them overboard.

Then Conops yelled again and vanished like a bat toward the bireme's bow. There was shouting, splashing and a red glare in the darkness at her bow-end—a thump of wood and iron as Conops levered the great anchor clear and dropped it overside—yells as it fell on heads below.

Then the glare increased; they were bringing more torches and burning brushwood. A dozen arrows flitted through the darkness near the longship's poop. Tros roared, bull-throated, to the rowers for the final effort; but they ceased, drooped, gasping at their oars, and the longship swung inshore as the warp held her stern against the tide.

Tros did not dare to let his crew of Britons get too near the riverbank; they would mutiny and join their friends. Nor could he let the warp go; he would have died rather than leave Conops at the mercy of drunken savages.

"Now if Lud of Lunden would give me a south wind—"

But Lud did better. He made some one mad. Tros would have needed time to set the sail. A shadowy boat flitted through the darkness and shot close up to the bireme's bow. A flat blast on a cow-horn split the night. Followed yelling. The red glare faded, giving place to moving shadows and din or argument. Conops returned in leaps to the bireme's stern and shouted, waving both hands.

"Way! Way! Yo-ho!" Tros thundered.

Helma plied the rope's end; the exhausted oarsmen strained, half-mutinous; the longship heeled and turned her head to midstream, until suddenly Tros laid his whole weight and strength on the steering-oar and the bireme slid gently backward off the mud. The tide had lifted her at last.

They towed her stern-first for a mile, until the longshore shouting died in the distance. Then Tros backed oars in a wide reach of river and lay alongside until Conops could make the warp fast in the bow, so as to bring the bireme's head upstream.

"Who was it saved us?" he asked Conops.

"Tide and a madman, master! Skell came over-river, blew a horn-blast, startled them, told them that he knew Cæsar's gold was in the bireme, offered them half of it if they would cut the warp and scare you off before they set fire to anything, kept them talking until the tide crept under her. This Lud of Lunden is a pretty decent sort of god!"

"Aye, Lud of Lunden! Aye," Tros muttered. "Aye. I knew there was a reason for preserving Skell. Lud of Lunden! I will make a little giftlet to that godlet. I believe he smiles on effort. He shall laugh!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN LUNDEN POOL

Shall I condone your treasons to renew my peace? How often have I told you that the qualities of faith and obedience evoke Wisdom in your rulers, aye, and in you also. Ill-faith and disobedience are clouds that hide Wisdom from you and from them. Ye have the government ye have earned. Ye suffer from the destiny that ye yourselves created. Ye may look in vain to me to hide you from the consequences of your treasons, for which I know no other remedy than good faith. See ye to it, each for himself.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

A GRAY, wet dawn was paling in the sky when Tros dropped anchor in the pool below the ford by Lunden Town. Caswallon's mouse-hued wooden roof, green-splashed with lichen, loomed through drifting mist between the autumn-tinted oaks.

Tros sighed for his sunlit Mediterranean, but he noticed that his Northmen prisoners, oar-weary though they were and stiff from the fighting of the day before, were in an environment they liked.

They sniffed the autumn air, leaned overside and praised the lush green meadows, nodded to one another sleepily as wooden and thatched roofs, barns and neat enclosures peeped out of the mist a moment to vanish again like dreams of fairyland. The lowing of cows asking to be milked appeared to fill them with excitement. They spoke of wealth in whispers.

Sigurdsen's high fever had abated. He had slept like a child and now seemed hardly to understand what had happened to him; his wife was talking in low tones, he answering in grunts, fingering the edge of the great battle-ax that lay across his knees and glancing from his wife to Helma, who sat facing him. The other woman was still keening her dead husband.

The Lunden Britons were late sleepers. Not a human being stirred along the waterfront on either side of the river, although a dog howled a general alarm and a whole pack joined him, galloping from house yards to patrol the river and bay indignant challenge to the skies. There were several rotting ships among the reeds, all smaller than the longship, and not one even river-worthy.

"This will never be a nation," Tros reflected. "There is no hope for them. Think of bringing two ships into Ostia, Tarentum, and Piræus, Smyrna, Alexandria, and none but a pack of dogs to give the challenge! They will be overwhelmed by foreigners. They will cease. A hundred years hence none will know the name of Britain."

But he was nearly as tired out as his oarsmen and as Conops, in no true mood for prophecy. Unlike them, he might not curl himself to sleep under the benches. He had no more fear on account of his British hirelings, who would stick like leeches now until he paid them. But he did not propose to be caught asleep by any of Caswallon's men, who might remove his prisoners, might even execute them, especially if Caswallon should be away from home; and that seemed likely.

He thought it strange, otherwise, that there should be none to receive him and bid him welcome, for the sake of good manners, however unfriendly they might feel. Caswallon must have known he would bring both ships up-river. Or—the thought stirred Tros to rumbling anger—had Caswallon left him purposely hard and fast on the river mud in hope that longshore pirates would wipe a difficulty off the slate? To be roundly punished for it afterward, no doubt, since kings must punish criminals and friendships must be honored. When the first hot flush of indignation died he decided to give Caswallon the benefit of that doubt; but he found it difficult, knowing that kings have harder work than other men to keep faith, subtler means of breaking it, and more excuse. There was Cæsar's gold, for instance.

When he had watched shore-bearings for a while to make sure the anchor held, he turned to Helma, hoping to take his mind off one worry by considering another.

"How did you learn Gaulish?" he asked.

"Some of us always do," she answered. "Don't we need it when we raid the coasts? I learned it from my nurse, who was a Briton taken in a raid and carried off to Malmoe. Britons are good servants, once they yield. She worked hard, I loved her."

"Love? Or was it belly-yearning?" Tros asked. "I have heard tell that Northmen think of nothing else but fighting, feasting and taking wives."

"None has had me to wife," she retorted, and there was pride in her eyes such as Tros had never seen.

"Well—well you behaved last night," he said, looking straight at her. "You are a poor cook, for you burned the stew; but you shall cook no more for me. What shall be done with you? Speak. Will you return to Malmoe?"

She bit her lip, then stabbed out words like dagger-blades.

"The men of Helsing drove my brother forth. Shall I return and serve them, saying that with my brother's ship I bought myself to give to them?"

"You hate me. Why did you stand by me in the pinch last night?" Tros asked.

"I am a sea-king's daughter. Should I side with *pirates?"* she demanded.

"What were you when you raided the Thames or when you burned a south coast village?" Tros inquired.

"Good Norse stock," she retorted. "We are vikings!" *

Tros was puzzled.

"What if I should take you back to Malmoe, and try an issue with the men of Helsing, and reëstablish you? What then?"

"Ah, you laugh at me." But there was no laughter in his eyes, and she was watching them. "You might make my brother a king again, for you are a bold man and you can handle a ship. But the skalds would call me a black-haired foreigner's wife until the very serving-wenches mocked me."

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* Vikings: the word means, literally, "Creek-men" and is probably a great deal older than the period of this story; originally a term of contempt, it ended, like similar words in other languages, by being proudly adopted by those whom it was coined to offend.

"Said I one word about wifeing?" Tros asked, astonished.

But she was astonished, too; backed away two steps from him looking as if he had struck her with a whip.

"I am a prisoner by my brother's oath of battle. I must abide that," she answered. "You are a prince? Have you a wife?"

"No," said Tros, watching her.

He knew now she was much more puzzled than he had been.

"You will not degrade me," she said with an air of confidence.

She implied they had both been talking in a foreign tongue and so could hardly understand each other. Biting her lip again, she calmed herself, made a nervous effort to be patient with him.

"I will speak with Olaf Sigurdsen," said Tros, and strode to where the Northman leaned against the stern all swathed in bandages, nervously thumbing his ax-hilt.

But Sigurdsen knew no Gaulish other than the words for mast and oar, beef, beer and a dozen place-names. Helma had to stand there and interpret.

"What shall I do with her?" Tros asked, signifying Helma with a sidewise motion of his head.

"She is yours!" said the Northman, astonished. "You won her!"

Helma interpreted, mimicking even the voice-note. Suddenly, as if she thought Tros had not understood yet, she pulled off her amber-and-gold shoulder-ornaments and thrust them toward him.

"Have you a wife?" asked Sigurdsen.

Helma translated. Sigurdsen's wife stood up beside her husband, staring at Tros as if he were some new kind of creature she had never heard of. She began whispering, and Sigurdsen nodded, spoke, with a note of grandeur in his voice.

"What does he say?" Tros demanded.

"He says—you returned him his weapon; you accepted his oath as a free man; but you did not say you returned me to him. Nevertheless, perhaps you meant that. Therefore, he being my brother and a king's son although without fief or following, and you his conqueror in battle and his sworn friend, he swears by Thor and Odin and his ax-blade I am born in noble wedlock and a fit bride; and he gives me to you, to be wife and to share your destiny on land and sea."

"Zeus!"

No thought of marrying had ever entered Tros's head, except as something he would never do. He had sworn no vow, but he had seen too many men grow fat and lazy in the meshes of a family not to promise himself he would die free of woman's ministering. He had something of his father's conviction that marriage was earthy of the earth, a good enough thing for the rabble but a trap that kept a strong soul from aspiring to the heights.

Sigurdsen spoke again, not knowing who Zeus might be, not understanding the explosion. He had never heard of a man's refusing a king's daughter.

"She is fair. She is young. She is a virgin. Call her wife before the Britons come and men speak ill of her."

Helma had to translate. She did it womanly-wise, her blue eyes—they were more blue than the northern sky—accepting destiny as something to be met and very proudly borne.

"I think you did not understand me yesterday," she said. "Nor I you. You are a brave man, Tros, and I will bear you sons of whom you shall not be ashamed."

Brave! Tros felt as weak as a seasick landsman! He was ashamed. He might refuse, and he would hate himself. He might accept and learn to hate the woman! He might give her to some other man and evermore regret it! Why had he taken prisoners? Why hadn't he made a gift of them to Caswallon when he had the chance?

Slowly—he was striving to hear the inner voice that usually guided; but either the inner man was deaf or the voice was sleeping—he let his left hand leave his sword-hilt; he did not know why. She stepped closer, smiling. Both arms stretched toward the girl before he knew it. She came into them, her head on his breast and at that very moment Conops wakened.

"Master!"

It was the exclamation of a man bereft of faith in the one eye that Cæsar's torturers had left him. Love-and-run in half the ports of the Levant was Conops' history, brief interludes of lazy days and tavern-haunting nights between long spells of hardship and service to Tros on land and sea. Loose, superstitious morals for himself but rigorous aloofness for his master from all worldly ways, was his religion. He had but one eye because he had dared to rebuke Cæsar for insulting Tros. He rubbed the other one, crest-fallen, as if the Tros he knew were gone and some one substituted whom he could not recognize.

Tros with a girl in his arms? He could not believe it. He came and glared, the tassel of his red cap down over his empty eye; the long tooth sneering through the slit in his upper lip; blood on his nose from yesterday. He fingered his long knife. He sidled three-quarters of a circle around Helma as if looking for an un-witch-protected opening through which to drive his knife.

"Master! And your father not buried!" he said, hardly reproachfully, rather as if he did not believe his senses.

He was jealous—jealous as a harbor-strumpet of a rival light o' love. The slobber blew in bubbles on his lean lips.

Tros was in no mood to be reproved by a servant. He let out a lick with his fist—caught Conops on the ear and sent him sprawling between the oar-benches.

"Dog!" he thundered. "Will you judge your betters?"

Conops did not hear that. He lay hugging his bruised head, grateful for it, glad of anything that drove the greater anguish out of mind, rocking himself, moaning, knees and elbows bunched.

Angry—for emotions such as Tros had come through turn to anger as the sour milk to whey—Tros swung his hands behind him and stood breast out, grim chin high, staring at the shore, ignoring Helma. She was the real irritant. He told himself it was not born in him to love a woman. If he had thought he loved her—had he?—that was only the emotion of a drunken sailor. Worse! it was sordid backsliding. A descent from his own Olympian heights of manhood to the common level of unmoral fools like Conops!

What would old Perseus have said to it? Hah! Old father Perseus did the same thing, didn't he? Tros wondered who his own mother had been, and by what means she had wheedled a middle-aged saint into the snares of marriage!

Tros knew she had died when he was born, but others had told him she was a royal woman, born of a line of kings whose throne was overturned by Rome. Perseus had forbidden speech of her, and as usual Tros had obeyed, only listening when other men dropped information.

Her death, as far as Perseus was concerned, had closed a life's chapter; thenceforth he had preached celibacy, not failing to instil into his son a wholesome—was it wholesome?—dread of women, or rather of the love of women and the loss of spiritual vision that ensued from it.

"Yet here am I," said Tros, his hands clenched tight behind him. "But for Perseus and a woman, I should not have been! I live! By Zeus and the immortal gods, I laugh!"

But he did not laugh. It irked him that Helma's eyes were on his back. He wished he had struck Conops harder. He wished all Lunden would awake and come down to the waterside. He would have welcomed anything just then, anything to save necessity of speech with Helma. He hated the girl! She and destiny between them had made a fine fool of him!

Yet as he turned to meet her gaze a new shame reddened his cheeks under the bronze. He realized he did not hate her. He knew he would be ashamed to withdraw the unspoken pledge he had made when he took her in his arms. She was his wife! He wished he had killed Conops!

He held out his hand to her with a stubborn gesture, drew her beside him, made her stand hand-in-hand with him there on the ship's stern, gesturing to Olaf Sigurdsen to rouse his Northmen. And when they had rubbed sleep out of their eyes they stood up, grinning, until it dawned on them that something else was due.

Sigurdsen led the cheering then, shaking his great battle-ax; and the din carried over-water to the houses near the riverbank, so that a dozen Britons came to stare, hitching their ungainly looking trousers.

Presently—being Britons, who would rather ride a dozen miles than walk one—horsemen came, riding bare-backed mounts into the river. A yellow-haired expert swam his horse all the way out to the longship, and mounted the stern, leaving the horse to swim where it chose.

"Lud love you!" he said, grinning, patting himself to squeeze water from his clothes. He eyed Helma appraisingly. "Norse girls are good. Those cursed red sea-robbers steal more of ours than we ever see of theirs, though! Wife, or ransom?" he asked, not pausing for an answer. "Caswallon took some prisoners, but they say there's no hope of ransom; some other gang of pirates drove them forth, so they came to seize holding in Britain. No homes—no friends. Still—is she a virgin?

"She's a well-bred filly. Those Northmen who raided her home might like to pay a long price for her. Lud love me! Is that Sigurdsen? What have you done to him, Tros? He fought his way out of the woods without a scratch on him. What's he doing with his ax? He's a prisoner, isn't he? Lud look at them! They're all armed! Who's the prisoner—you?"

"Where is Caswallon?" Tros asked.

"Over on the hilltop with the druids, hours away, loving the wounded, you know; wants to be popular. But it won't work. There are too many who say he shouldn't have fitted out your expedition, sixty or seventy killed and maimed. Lud think of it! As if these bloody Northmen weren't trouble enough!

"And there's a woman from Gaul—wait till you see her. You'll soon forget that one, Tros. She had a letter for you from Cæsar. Caswallon burned it in a rage, but she says she knows what Cæsar wrote, and she'll tell you. Caswallon didn't dare to treat her roughly, because half of us fell hide-and-hoof in love with her, and there are plenty who say he ought to make terms with Cæsar.

"She says you and Cæsar understand each other, and we all want to know what Cæsar's terms are. Skell came shortly after midnight, wandered all over town trying to wake people, but we were too tired to listen to him. Besides, Skell is a liar. He's in his own house now. I saw the smoke as I came by."

"Skell?" said Tros.

"Yes, Skell, the man you packed off to Caritia to talk to Cæsar. Skell the liar, Skell who *said* you helped him to wreck Cæsar's fleet, although everybody knew you did it alone. Why didn't you kill him, Tros? Skell said something last night about having saved you in the river—longshoremen or something. Nobody believed him. He said you'd sent him ahead to warn us all not to listen to anything Caswallon says until we've heard you."

"Where is Fflur?" Tros asked, when the youngster paused for breath.

"With Caswallon, getting in the druids' way, I suppose, helping to hurt the wounded. What are you going to do with this ship?

Burn it? Say—that's a good idea! Burn both ships! Make a floating bonfire in the Pool to-night! To-night's the funeral. All the countryside in procession from Lunden to the burying-ground, chariots, torches. They say your father's corpse'll be right in front, ahead of everything except old 'Longbeard.' Why not have a bonfire of two ships when we come back? Something to show Cæsar's woman. Show her we Britons can stage a circus too!"

"Where is Orwic?" Tros inquired.

"Nursing himself and trying to rule Lunden. Caswallon left him in charge. But Orwic isn't popular just now—lost too many men on your expedition. Everybody says it must have been his fault. And no loot--didn't bring a stick of loot back with him from Gaul.

"Everybody says, 'Caswallon's nephew is Caswallon's man,' and the chief hasn't been popular these ten days past. Besides, why did Orwic wait so long before he came to help us in the woods? Say, did you see me cut down three Northmen on the run, right down by the riverbank there, where the mud's deep and the thicket goes clear to the water?

"They're trying to make out now that I had help. Three men claim they were in that with me; but maybe you saw from across the river? Did you? Maybe you can swear I did it single-handed. Three great brutes of Northmen as big as Sigurdsen there! Did you hear the first one roar when I stuck a spear in him?

"The other two went down silent, but the first one made noise enough for all three. Did you hear him? Their weapons and armor are held for prize-court and those others'll lie me out of them unless you can uphold me. Can you?"

Tros did not answer. Orwic's boat came hurrying out of the reeds, and Orwic hailed him.

"Lud!" exclaimed the visitor. "Where's my horse? Gone? No matter!"

He plunged into the river and swam shoreward. Orwic, standing in a boat's stern, could not help but see him; he stared hard, watched the yellow head go rippling like a water-rat, but said nothing. He boarded the longship, saluting Tros with a genial grin that, nevertheless, not more than masked a feeling of restraint.

"Skell is here," he said, pursing his lips, staring hard at Helma.

"So is Cornelia, a Gaulish woman with Roman paint on her. She says she knows you, Tros."

"She lies," Tros answered calmly.

"So does Skell," said Orwic. "But they both lie artfully! The woman says Cæsar has appointed you his agent here in Britain. Skell says he preserved you from the river-pirates, in return for which you and he made peace. He says you grant him the protection of your privilege. Is that true? Is there any truth in it?"

"You were with me, Orwic. You heard all I said to Cæsar."

"Aye, but I know no Latin, Tros! I know you called me off when I was hard at Cæsar with eight men in the bireme's bows. What about Skell? Did you promise him anything?"

Tros grew hot under the bandages that swathed his head. He tore them off.

"I promised you my friendship," he said grimly.

"Yes, I know you did. You beat me in a fair fight, and I took your hand, Tros. Haven't I stood by you since? Caswallon is your friend, too. But don't forget, Tros, Caswallon is king here, and you are a foreigner. Your life and your goods are in our safe-keeping, but if you make difficulties for us we must think of ourselves first."

"If I am not welcome, I will go," Tros answered.

Orwic hesitated, stroking his moustache. Tros's thought leaped to the chest of Cæsar's gold that Fflur was supposed to be keeping for him. Thoughtfully he eyed his Northmen prisoners, and wondered whether he could manage the longship with that scant crew. There was the Belgian coast; he might make that. And there was the unknown Norse country, that his bones almost ached to explore.

"I would bid you go," Orwic said at last, "but I dare not. There are too many now who believe you bring Cæsar's message, and they want to hear it. There are too many who accuse Caswallon of having sent you to make overtures to Cæsar; too many, again, who believe the contrary and blame Caswallon for having sent you to stir Cæsar against us. We are all divided.

"Some say Caswallon looks to Cæsar to make him king over all Britain; others say Cæsar will conquer Britain first and crucify Caswallon afterwards! There are some who want to kill you, Tros, and some who want to honor you as Cæsar's messenger."

"What say the druids?" Tros asked.

"That they will bury your father's body. And that unless we can persuade you there will be none to answer all these tales. They say if you should go, then all men would declare Caswallon was afraid of you, and would turn against him; but if you should stay, Britons will be at one another's throats within a day or two!"

He paused a moment, watching Tros's eyes steadily, then suddenly advanced with a dramatic gesture.

"Tros, I speak you frankly. If we, Caswallon's friends, should treat you as less than an honored guest, your life would be in danger from our own hot-heads, who are ready to admire you if Caswallon does, or to hate you if he doesn't They will follow his lead.

"But if we honor you, then Caswallon's enemies will hurl that as a charge against him. Nevertheless, those same men will befriend you, if you let them, and make use of you to attack Caswallon! What do you say, Tros?"

"I? What should I say?" Tros answered. "What do I care for the feuds of Briton against Briton? I came to attend my father's funeral."

"Are you Cæsar's man?" asked Orwic.

Tros flew into a rage at that. He clenched his fists and answered in a voice that made the Northmen jump and brought Conops, knife in hand, from between the benches.

"No! By Zeus and the dome of heaven, no! Do you understand what no means? Rot you and your muddy Lud of Lunden! Rot you all! I vomit on you! Cæsar may help himself to your wives and children! Let him enslave you! What do I care! *War-r-ugh!* You bickering fools—town against town—you are worse than my own Greeks!

"Do you listen to your druids? No! Do you listen to your chiefs? No! What do you listen to? Your belly-rumblings! You believe your colic is a cosmic urge! You think your island is the middle of the universe!

"You accuse your friends and make love to your enemies! You and your chariots! Look at your ships there, rotting! Look at me"—Tros struck his breast—"I grieve! Look at me! I weep! Why? On your account? The gods forbid it! I hope Cæsar treads you underfoot! I grieve that my father's dust must mingle with the dirt of Britain! Woe is me! Woe that I ever set foot in Britain!"

"Peace!" said Orwic, but Tros turned away from him, shaking with fury.

His violence had reopened the wound on his cheek and Helma stanched the blood, using the bandage he had tossed aside. Conops whispered to him; he struck Conops, hurling him headlong again between the benches. Then, black with anger, he strode up close to Orwic, hands behind him.

"Tell Caswallon, I attend my father's funeral. Say this: By Zeus, I'll solve his difficulties! Can he fight? Is he a man? Hah! Let him believe either me, or else Skell and these other liars! Let him waste no time about it! If he chooses to call me an enemy, he shall fight me before all Lunden!"

Orwic forced a smile and tried to pour the oil of jest on anger.

"How would that help? They would say you fought him for the kingdom, Tros!"

"Caswallon's kingdom? I? That for it!" Tros spat into the river. "Hah! Barter my freedom for the right to be disobeyed and choused by long-haired horse-copers? Gods listen to him! Tell Caswallon I wouldn't thank him for what he calls his kingdom! Tell him I doubt his friendship! Bid him haste and prove it or else fight me! Go tell him!"

"Tros, those are unwise words!" said Orwic.

"They are mine! This is my sword!" Tros answered, tapping the gilded hilt of his long weapon.

"Tros, you and I swore friendship."

"Swore? What is a man's oath worth! Show me the friendship!"

"Tros, I spoke you fair. I only told you how the matter lies. I asked an honest question."

"Zeus! I gave an honest answer! Call me friend or enemy! By Zeus, it means nothing to me which way a fish jumps!"

"Your eyes burn. You are tired, Tros."

"Aye! Tired of you Britons and your ways! 'Am I Cæsar's man'! Ye gods of sea and earth! Get off my ship!"

But Orwic did not move, except to smile and hold his hand out.

"Nay, Tros. I rule Lunden in Caswallon's absence. Welcome to Lunden! I speak in Caswallon's name."

He showed a great ring on his thumb. Tros glared at it.

"I know you are not Cæsar's man," said Orwic.

At which Tros flew into another fury.

"Pantheon of Heaven! You! You know that? You, who saw me wreck all Cæsar's ships! You, who were with me at Seine-mouth and saw me rape Cæsar's lair! You, who saw my father's tortured body! You! You know I am not Cæsar's man—because I said it?"

Orwic smiled again, his hand outheld.

"You will admit, Tros, that you said it with a certain emphasis. A man may be excused if he believes you."

"Take my message to Caswallon!"

"I stand in Caswallon's place. I speak for him. I have received the message. I prefer to call you friend."

"Words again?" Tros asked.

He felt disappointed. He had enjoyed the burst of anger. In the moment's mood it would have suited him to carry challenge to conclusion.

"No more words," said Orwic. "Give me your hand, Tros. There."

He stepped close and embraced him, smearing his own cheek with Tros's blood.

"Welcome to Lunden! Now I go to make a good room ready for you in Caswallon's house."

"Young cockerel! Brave young cockerel!" Tros muttered, watching him overside, then turning suddenly to Helma:

"That is the man you should have married. Shall I give you to him? Orwic is the best-bred cockerel in Britain."

She looked puzzled, wondering whether he imagined that was humor.

"I am pledged to you, Tros."

"I will free you."

"No. He is only a Briton. You are a sea-king. I will bear your sons."

"Zeus!" he muttered, wondering. "Has all the world gone mad? Come here!" he ordered.

When she came, he kissed her and Conops cried shame at him from beneath an oar-bench. It was a dawn of mixed emotions as opaque and changing as the Lunden mist.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CORNELIA OF GAUL

Goodness needs no bow and arrows, nay, nor armor. Aye, I know that good men die, and that their enemies can kill them. I have heard that. I have seen it. It is nothing new to me. The evil also die, and so do they who lend themselves to evil purposes, because they lack judgment, that is born of Wisdom, that is a stranger to weakness. Your harlots die; ye harlot-mongers also. And some of you say that in death all are equals. But I say that in death ye are equally judged by the Eternal Justice that rewards evil with evil and good with good. If ye identify yourselves with evil, shall Eternity say nay to it? I think not; ye shall have your fill of evil, until ye weary of it and begin again at your beginnings. But if ye identify yourselves with faith, hope and integrity, with generosity and good-will and courage, howsoever small your beginnings, ye shall have them and their increase. They are yours. They are you. Ye shall unlock the gates of Wisdom and all knowledge.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

So Tros's prisoners—since he had freed them and they were now his henchmen—became Caswallon's guests along with Tros in the great house on the hilltop. In Caswallon's absence Orwic showed them almost too much courtesy, to the annoyance of servants and fair-haired British men-at-arms who lounged in the great hall or amused themselves at horse-play in the yard.

But it gave the Northmen an enormously high opinion of Tros; and when Orwic brought out Cæsar's treasure chest, so that Tros might pay off his hireling seamen, even Sigurdsen began to boast of being Tros's adherent and Helma put on airs toward the British women, who were friendly enough until she began to patronize them.

So the Britons brought forth horses and compelled the Northmen to try to ride, mounting them two on a horse; and into the deriding mob of onlookers Cornelia came, attended by a crowd of young bloods dressed in their choicest finery, wearing enough gold and bronze and amber among them to have overpaid one of Cæsar's legions for a year.

While they were laughing at the Northmen's efforts to ride half-broken stallions scared into a frenzy by men who despised the sea as only fit for fishermen, Cornelia studied Tros from a distance.

He had done paying his hirelings and was counting the rest of the gold, or rather pretending to count it, watching her between-whiles as adroitly as she watched him, each avoiding the other's eyes. Gathering her escort around her at last, she made her way outside the crowd toward where Tros sat on a chair on Caswallon's porch.

She walked with dignity that she had imitated from the Romans. Her dress and jewelry were Roman, apeing the patrician style, pure white with a golden border, and she showed no trace of having suffered on her stormy way from Gaul. Her dark hair glistened in a net that held it massed behind her neck; gilded sandals decorated rather than concealed her feet. She looked expensive and calmly impudent. But her stock-in-trade was nothing tangible, although it was all in evidence: an air of knowing more than anybody else knew, of having influence that none could undermine, of laughing at life because she held the keys of fortune.

Those keys, too, were evident: brown eyes beneath long, dark lashes; carmine, daring, not exactly scornful lips; a figure that suggested limitless immodesty beneath cultured poise; a gown that clung precisely where it should cling to excite emotion when she moved with that apparently unstudied ease.

Tros knew her type. Helma did not and stood nearer to him, light of northern sky blazing under flaxen brows, Norse jealousy hardening her young face. Helma was afraid; Tros felt her trembling when her elbow touched his. But the Gaulish woman with the Roman name had trained herself in far too many swift intrigues to show fear, even if she felt it. Rome had made a hundred conquests in the wake of women of her genius; and before Rome, Nineveh. Inborn in her was all the grace of courts and all the spirit of destruction.

"The noble Tros?" she asked, coming to a stand in front of him, not trespassing yet on Caswallon's porch.

And Tros was not yet minded that she should. He did not rise. He kicked his long sword outward so that its hilt rested on his knees and he could lay both hands on it, leaning back in the chair to stare insolently, through suspicious, slumberous eyes.

"My name is Tros."

"I am Cornelia."

"Cæsar's light o' love?" he asked, raising shaggy black eyebrows just sufficiently to barb the insult. "Cæsar's slave?"

"Cæsar's messenger!" the Gaulish woman answered.

There was no iron in her voice; nothing but challenging laughter. Cæsar had not picked a thin-skinned fool to pave Rome's way to conquest.

Conops came out of the house with Cæsar's scarlet cloak and draped it on Tros's shoulders, Helma assisting to arrange it, half-guessing its significance although she did not know that Tros had looted it along with the Roman's bireme.

The young Britons who had appointed themselves Cornelia's body-guard began to whisper to her. One of them grew bold and raised his voice:

"Tros, your insolence insults us all!"

Tros sneered; his mood was cynical. Orwic came out of the house to stand behind him. Orwic being in authority just then the crowd grew still, until Cornelia spoke in Latin:

"Cæsar's cloak, Tros! You foreshadow Cæsar! He will take that for an omen when I tell him Tros sat cloaked in imperial scarlet on the porch of Caswallon's house."

"They talk Latin," some one shouted. "Tros is Cæsar's man!"

There were more than a hundred people by that time on the green before Caswallon's house, not counting the stable-hands and other serfs, who were hardly to be reckoned with, not daring to offend their betters; some were men who had come too late to fight the Northmen, jealous of the victors' spoils and very anxious to assert themselves.

A tumult began, a few of them denouncing Tros as an intriguer, some shouting that Cæsar's message should be heard. A noisy, small group, nearest to the gate and safety, denounced Caswallon. Orwic swore under his breath, using the names of a dozen Celtic gods. Tros whispered to Conops:

"Bid my Northmen gather themselves behind the house and enter it from the rear. Take charge of them. Add yourselves to Orwic's men. Be swift."

Then he turned to Orwic.

"Now or never," he said, with a careless shrug of his shoulders.

"Is Caswallon king in Lunden? Gently, boy, gently. Not yet. Leave this to me. I will show you who rules this end of Britain!"

He stood up, letting his face light with laughter, gathering Cæsar's scarlet cloak around him. He addressed Cornelia, but in a voice that all the crowd could hear, and he spoke slowly, in Gaulish, as if answering her speech, and taking care that all should understand him, in spite of his foreign accent:

"Aye, woman! This was Cæsar's cloak. You, who were Cæsar's light o' love until he sent you to cozen me, were not so very clever when you recognized it! I am told you brought me a letter from Cæsar. I am told Caswallon burned it. I am told you are warning the Britons not to listen to Caswallon until they first hear me. I am Caswallon's guest!"

He could hear the tramping through the house behind him as the Northmen came with Conops to reenforce Orwic's men. There was a noise of weapons being lifted from the racks.

"Cæsar sent you to me— Are you ready, Orwic?" he whispered. "March out and surround her when I give the word!—You are mine, Cornelia. I will see that none perverts you from right conduct in the realm of him who is host to both of us! Come!" he commanded, beckoning.

Cornelia appealed to her escort, too late. Orwic took the cue and rushed from the porch with forty men-at-arms behind him, twelve of them Northmen very anxious to repay bruises done at horseplay. It was risky work; the Northmen, fierce enemies a day ago, were likelier than not to cause indignant bloodshed; safety lay in doing the work so swiftly that there would be no time for a crowd without a leader to decide whether it really was indignant or was half amused.

Conops and the Northmen surrounded Cornelia; Orwic and his Britons who thrust themselves between the Northmen and her British escort, joining spears before them like a fence-rail, forcing the astonished escort back on their heels. And while Orwic accomplished that, Tros shouted, throwing up his right arm, shaking Cæsar's scarlet cloak to distract attention to himself:

"Ho, there! Caswallon's friends! There is a rat named Skell who brought this Cæsar's woman to cheat away your freedom! Where is Skell?"

Caswallon's friends were fewer than his enemies in that crowd, but the impulse of surprise was in their favor. By the time Cornelia had been hustled into the great hall in the midst of a group of grinning Northmen, who handled her none too gently, the loyalists had started a diversion, shout and counter-shout, that served until Orwic's summons on a silver bugle brought a dozen chariots from the stable to clear the green of friend and enemy alike. The crowd did not even try to stand against the chariots, although the front ones had no scythes fixed to the wheels. But there were two chariots in the rear that could have mown a crimson swath.

"And now swiftly!" said Tros, when Orwic strolled back to the porch trying to look self-possessed. "Where are those Northmen prisoners Caswallon took in the fight in the forest?"

"What of them? There are only three-and-twenty, some of them pretty badly hurt," said Orwic.

"Where are they? I know mobs! Your Britons will say that it was Northmen who snatched that woman away. They will kill those three-and-twenty. Then, they will come to kill my twelve and Sigurdsen. Then me, then you!"

"Bah! Who cares if they kill Northmen!" Orwic answered.

"I for one! Blood-lust grows. They will kill Caswallon next! Smuggle those prisoners to this place. Start a hue-and-cry at Skell's heels; that fox will give them a run to keep all Lunden busy! Send for Caswallon then, and bid him hurry. Bid him bring Fflur with him!"

Orwic hesitated, but Tros took him by the shoulders.

"Am I friend or enemy?" he thundered. "Boy! That woman will win Britain for Cæsar yet unless you act swiftly!"

Orwic yielded only half convinced and hurried away to instruct his friends, shutting the great gate and posting guards to keep another crowd from forming. Tros strode into the house, swaggering as if he owned it. Cornelia was seated near Caswallon's great chair under the balcony at one end of the hall; her dress was ruffled and a little torn, but she was laughing at the men who stared at her, and she mocked Tros, gesturing at Helma:

"Ah! You seize me, when you have that beautiful fair-haired prisoner! What use for poor me, when—"

"I have a use for you," Tros interrupted, and the hall grew still. "You were Cæsar's slave. Now you are mine!"

She was startled, but the scared look vanished in an instant; she had the professional intriguer's self-control. It was Helma who turned pale and came and stood beside Tros, watching his face.

"Tros," said the woman of Gaul, speaking Latin, "Cæsar has told me you are proud and full of guile, and a great keeper of rash promises. You promised him enmity. You wrecked his fleet. You forged Cæsar's name and stole your father from the grip of three camped legions.

"That was an indignity to Rome as well as Cæsar. You sunk Cæsar's boats; you slew his men; you ducked Cæsar himself in the tide at Seine-mouth. So you kept your rash promise.

"Yet Cæsar's magnanimity is greater than the malice that pursues him. He is willing to forgive. He offers you full recognition by the Roman Senate and command of fifty ships, if you withdraw your enmity and promise him allegiance! I am Cæsar's messenger, not your slave."

Tros answered her in Gaulish—

"When I need fifty of Cæsar's ships, I will take them without his leave or Rome's!"

But that was for the Britons' ears. He had in mind more than to bandy words.

"Tros—" she began again.

"Silence!" he commanded.

Then he pointed to the door of an inner room between the great hall and Caswallon's quarters. Helma bit her lip, and several of the men-at-arms laughed loud. But Tros kept on pointing, and he looked imperious in Cæsar's scarlet cloak.

So Cornelia rose out of her chair, bowed, smirked almost imperceptibly at Helma, and led the way in through the door, glancing over-shoulder in a way that gave Tros pause. He beckoned Helma.

"Bring your brother's wife and the widow!" he commanded.

So three Norse women followed Tros into the dimly lighted room; and one of them knew Gaulish. There were benches in there for men-at-arms, and one chair, on which Cornelia sat uninvited, arranging her draperies to show the shapely outline of her figure.

Tros slammed the door and slid the wooden bolt in place, with a nod to Helma and the other women to be seated on the benches. He seized Cornelia's chair then and dragged it into the shaft of light that fell through the one small window. He craved sleep and had not time to waste.

"Turn your face to the light," he commanded. "Keep it so. Now, no evasions. I am in no mood to split thin hairs of courtesy."

"Truly, Tros, your courtesy is thin," she answered. "Cæsar is never discourteous, even to his enemies. I was told you are a prince's son. Where you were born are manners thought unmanly?"

"Answer this!" He rapped his sword-hilt on a table that he dragged up to the window-light. "What was written in Cæsar's letter that Caswallon took from you and burned?"

She smiled and tossed her head. "I gave it to the Lord Caswallon. He had manners. He was too polite to take it from me!"

"What was written in that letter?"

"Since the letter was burned, what matters what was written in it!"

Her dark eyes dared him.

Tros drew his sword, his great chin coming forward with a jerk. He let the sword-point fall until it touched her bare throat.

"Answer me."

Her eyes turned slightly inward as she looked along the sword-blade toward the marvelously steady hilt, but she did not wince. The sword-point pricked the skin. She did not even flinch from it.

"I will not tell! And you dare not kill me!"

Tros let the sword-point fall until it touched her naked foot between the crossed thongs of her sandal. A dancing-woman's foot was where her fear might lie closest to the surface. But she laughed.

"Before these women, Tros! What would the Britons say to you? Cæsar may torture women, and you might—though I think not, for I see a weakness—but the Britons don't even whip their children. Would Caswallon forgive you if you should nail my foot to the floor of his house?"

Tros owned to the weakness she divined in him. He could kill, in cold blood or in anger, but the very thought of torture made him grit his teeth. The half of his hatred of Cæsar was due to his contempt for Cæsar's practices; he liked the Britons because they did not practise cruelty.

But he could be cruel in another way. Compunction that prevented torturing man or woman implied no inhibition against mental terrorism. He could hardly bear to see a fish gaffed if the hook would serve, and could not kill a cur like Skell unless his own life were in danger, but he could be as ruthless as the sea, as practical as fate in matching means to ends.

His eyes changed, and the woman noticed it. He glanced at Helma.

"Bring my man Conops!" he commanded, and he set his sword-point on the floor between his feet, to lean on it and wait.

He did not have to wait long. As Helma drew the bolt, the door swung inward. Conops lurched into the room, shielding his head with his arm, in fear of the blow he had earned by eavesdropping, too wise in his master's ways to offer an excuse.

When the blow did not fall he peeped over his arm, then dropped the arm, blinked his eye and grinned, knowing danger was over. Tros's punishments were prompt, or else not meted out at all.

"News?" Tros asked him.

"None, master. Only I heard say they are hunting Skell; and a chariot went for Caswallon."

"Caswallon is coming, eh? Have you a wife?"

Tros knew the answer, but he chose that Cornelia should learn the truth from Conops' lips.

"No, master—surely you know that! The last woman I—"

A frown convinced him he had said enough.

Tros turned to Cornelia.

"This man is no beauty, is he! He is not well-bred. His manners are of the fore-peak quality. He disciplines a woman with a knife-hilt. He is single. He is old enough to marry. He would serve me better if he had a wife to keep him from longshore escapades. I will give you to Conops to be his wife—his wife, you understand me? Conops is a free man, he can own a wife."

He had her. She was out of the chair, indignant, terrified, appealing to the other women, ready to scream, in a panic, struggling to control herself. Tros's threat was something he could easily fulfil, since she was his by all the written and unwritten laws.

If she should claim that she was Cæsar's slave, then Tros, as Cæsar's enemy, might do as he pleased with her by right of capture, she having been sent to use her wiles on him, not on Caswallon. If she should declare herself a free woman, she might fool Britons but not Tros, who knew the Roman law and knew the dreadful penalties that even Cæsar, who had sent her, would be forced to inflict should she be returned to him branded, a slave who had claimed to be free.

If Tros should make a gift of her to Conops, the Britons might be offended, but there would be no chance of their interfering. Marriage by gift was binding, all the more so if the woman were a slave or a prisoner of war. She would not become Conops' slave because he might not sell her; she would be bound to him for life, promoted or reduced to his rank—considering it promotion or reduction as she pleased—in theory free, in practice a sailor's drudge.

Conops was as much alarmed as she was.

"Master!" he exploded. "What use is she on a ship? Why, she can't even cook! She's—"

"Peace, you drunken, blabbing fool! When I give you a wife, you'll take her and be grateful, or I'll break your head! Think yourself lucky to—"

But she who had been Cæsar's light o' love could not face life with Conops.

"I will tell, Tros!" she said, and sat down on the chair again, shuddering. "You will not give me to that one-eyed thing?"

Tros nodded, grunted. He hated to bargain with her, but on the other hand it would have gone against the grain to ruin Conops by imposing such a wife on him.

"What Cæsar wrote to you, Tros, it was meant that the Lord Caswallon should read. It was supposed that some one, some druid, would know Latin and translate it to him. But the lord burned the letter."

"What did Cæsar write?" Tros thundered at her. "And why in Latin?"

"He wrote, Lord Tros, that he trusted you, as agreed between you and him at Seine-mouth, to stir up the Britons against the Lord Caswallon; in return for which he promised, as agreed, to confer high command on you as soon as sufficient Britons should recognize the advantage of welcoming the Roman legions into Britain. He concluded by reminding you of your pledge that there shall be no opposition to his landing on the coast of Britain when he comes again. And he charged you, to that end, to support the Lord Caswallon's enemies."

Tros stroked his beard and pecked with his sword-point at the floor boards.

"Why did he write those lies?" he demanded.

But he knew why. He knew she was telling the truth. He knew Cæsar's methods.

She recovered a trace of her former impudence.

"Who am I, to know Cæsar's mind?" she answered, and Tros recognized something else, that she was ready to betray any one for her own advantage. He clutched Conops' arm and pulled him forward.

"Answer me in full, or—"

"Cæsar hoped that any of several things might happen. The Lord Caswallon might kill you, which would be payment for your impertinence at Seine-mouth. Or the Lord Caswallon might mistrust you and put you to flight, when you might fall into Cæsar's hands and be crucified.

"Or, learning of the Lord Caswallon's mistrust, you might turn against him in self-defense and, joining his enemies, start rebellion against him, setting Briton against Briton, which would make invasion simpler. Or, you might be sensible and, accepting magnanimous forgiveness, take command of Cæsar's fleet, making use of your great knowledge of the British coast to forward an invasion."

"Or—?"

Tros knew there was something left unsaid. He jabbed his sword into the floor, pulled back the hilt and let it go until it hummed. She understood him. She must speak before the humming ceased.

"Tros, I am trained. I sing and dance. Some men are easily tempted. Cæsar thought—"

"Continue! What did Cæsar think?"

"I am not sure I know what he thought."

"Then I will tell you. Cæsar thought I might be fool enough to accept his promise from your lips! I might be fool enough to turn against Caswallon, might be fool enough to captain Cæsar's fleet awhile, fool enough to come within his reach and serve him, until usefulness was spent and he could pick another quarrel, crucify me at his leisure. You were to beguile me and betray me to him at the proper time!"

"Lord Tros, I could not have done it! I could not betray a man like you! I was Cæsar's slave. Now I am yours. I would rather be yours. You are not wicked, as Cæsar is! Lord Tros, I will be your faithful slave. I will betray Cæsar to you! Only no degradation! I am not a common slave."

"I pity you," Tros answered. "Pity shall make no fool of me nor a successful rogue of you! Answer my other question: Why did Cæsar write in Latin and not Gaulish? He knew the Lord Caswallon knows no Latin."

"Ah! But if the letter were in Gaulish, the Lord Caswallon might have been sharp enough to understand it was a trick to turn him against you."

Tros laughed in spite of weariness and anger, sheathing his sword.

"Who sups with Cæsar needs a long spoon!"

She tried to take advantage of his changed mood, gazing at him with dark, lustrous eyes that verged on tears.

"Lord Tros, you said you pity me. I was free-born. Romans destroyed our city when I was a young child. I was sold, and they took me to Rome. Do you know what that means? To save myself from the worst that can befall a woman I strove to become so valuable that for their own sakes they would not throw me on the market.

"A dealer had bought me; he had me taught to dance and sing; he began to make use of me to entertain his customers; and so I learned intrigue.

"Once, when Cæsar was in Rome, I was sent to coax him to buy man-slaves. I entertained him, and he bought, at above the market rate for such cattle as I offered. Then, thinking better of it, he returned those man-slaves to the dealer and kept me, at the price of three of them.

"And since then he has used me for his purposes, bringing me to Gaul because I knew my mother-tongue. Lord Tros, 'like master like slave!' I have had to be wicked, because Cæsar is! Lord Tros, I will serve you as I never served Cæsar!"

She glanced at Helma, smiled with such meekness and such lustrous eyes that Helma was stirred to sympathy and rose from the bench, though Sigurdsen's wife whispered and restrained her.

"She is yours, too. Lord Tros, let me serve her!"

Helma shuddered. She had not expected that. She shook her head. But Tros was in a quandary and given to strange, masterful impulses when in that mood.

"You have joined your destiny to mine," he said to Helma. "You shall do your part. Take charge of her, keep her until Caswallon comes."

Helma protested in a flutter of mistrust. She whispered to the other women, then seizing Tros's arm, begged him to be more cautious.

"She will betray us all! Let Britons guard her!"

But Tros knew jealousy when he saw it. He laughed. "I have given you your task," he answered.

"Then at least a guard of Northmen!"

"Zeus!" he exploded. But Helma saw the laughter in his eyes. "Are Northmen deaf? And you dumb? If they are my men, shall they not obey you?"

She dropped her eyes, apologizing, pleased.

"So be it. All, save Sigurdsen," she answered.

But when she looked up it was at Conops. She knew well enough she could manage Sigurdsen.

"Heh? What was that? Who disobeys you deals with me!" Tros answered.

He, too, suddenly faced Conops.

"You! You see that woman? Helma her name is. She is my bride. You obey her, save and except only when her orders clash with mine!"

Conops blinked. Helma smiled at him.

"*Oimoi!* We were master and man. Now we are three and all the Furies shall overtake us!" Conops murmured.

For which impertinence Tros took him by the ear and cuffed him.

Over Helma there crept a new, visible sense of possession. Nothing that Tros could have said or done could have made as much impression as that speech. She had come into her own; she was his mate, his partner!

Strangers they might be, with almost all to learn about each other, but Tros had laid a rock of confidence in place, on which to build the future, and her eyes glowed gratitude.

CHAPTER XXXV

TROS STRIKES A BARGAIN

> Ye who stipulate and haggle, will ye never learn that if ye give without price or stipulation ye are copying the gods, who give and ask not?
>
> FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

TROS slept until Caswallon came, full pelt, with a yell to the guard at the gate, reining in foaming stallions with their fore-feet over the porch and leaping along the pole between them into the house, Fflur following a moment later. The chief and Orwic were conferring when Tros rose sleepily and bulked through the leather curtains that divided inner room from hall. Caswallon eyed him swiftly, searchingly, then smiled and strode to meet him.

"Brother Tros!" he said, embracing in the British fashion, one cheek then the other, each man's right hand patting the other's back.

Caswallon thrust the pawing dogs away, pretending anger, and took Fflur's hand, she watching Tros as if she could read thoughts before he formed them. Three children came and clung to Fflur, but she hardly noticed them, although they laughed at her because her hair was all blown from the chariot ride and she was mud-bespattered from Caswallon's trick of driving through and over anything he met.

"What is this about the Gaulish woman?" Caswallon asked, when he had waited for Tros to speak and Tros said nothing.

"She was Cæsar's slave," Tros answered. "She was not entitled to be anybody's guest. Cæsar insulted you, me, all of us, every Briton of the Trinobantes, when he sent a *slave* to intrigue among us as an equal."

"So," said Caswallon, and tugged his moustache.

He glanced at Fflur, but she looked away and gave him no counsel.

"A slave, eh? Do you know that?"

Tros laughed.

"I will sell her to you, if you wish. She is mine, since Cæsar sent her to beguile me. I will write you a bill of sale for her and sign it with Cæsar's name and seal. To make it full and binding I will wear his cloak that I took with his seal and treasure-chest. Do you want her?"

He was watching Fflur sidewise, considering the drama that her eyes revealed. Suddenly he caught her full gaze and she nodded; they understood each other.

"If you are my friend, Tros," said Fflur in her quiet voice, "you will keep that woman from Caswallon."

"What is to be done with her?" asked Tros.

But instead of answering, Caswallon let go Fflur's hand and strode a dozen paces up the hall and back again.

"Tros," he said at last. "She was swift, she was swifter than death! She came by night in a chariot, with a tale of shipwreck and the friendship of the men of Hythe. She said nothing of Skell. By morning she had won half Lunden. She came to visit me with more than thirty young bloods fawning on her. She showed me Cæsar's letter, and she spoke of you.

"In an hour, nay, in less than an hour, she had offered to betray both you and Cæsar. She gave me that letter, and I burned it. It was Latin, and besides, you had been my friend. I did not choose to let my eyes see proof against you. Then—we were alone then—she spoke to me of you and Fflur."

"He believed it!" Fflur interrupted. There was almost hatred in her eyes. "He took that woman's word that I, the mother of his sons, was—"

"Fflur!" Caswallon did his best to smile, but the ire in her gray eyes chilled him. "You heard what the druid said. Did he not say an evil woman can corrupt the strongest man in a little while? Did the druid not say I was no more to be blamed than if I took a wound in battle? Have I not begged your forgiveness until my tongue stuttered against my teeth for lack of words?"

"Yes, words!" Fflur answered. "But you turned that woman loose to make worse mischief. You let her go and live with—"

"Should I have kept her in my house?" Caswallon almost yelled at her.

"No," said Fflur.

"Should I have killed her? What would the druids have said to that? What would half Britain have said that is forever urging me to listen to Cæsar's terms. Lud knows, it's hard enough to rule, without new excuses for dissensions. I had to say I would take time for thought. And before I could think, those Northmen came plundering the river villages."

Tros tried to pour oil on the waves of argument.

"The question is, what shall be done with her."

"That which should have first been done with her!" Fflur answered. "Send her back to Cæsar with a whipping, in a dress turned inside out and a whip in her hand as a gift to Cæsar! Bid her tell him that is Fflur's reply to Rome!"

Caswallon shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. His blundering, good-natured, gentlemanly sense of statecraft pulled him one way, his affection for his wife another.

"Fflur is forever positive," he grumbled, taking Tros by the shoulder. "But what would you do? Half my kingdom favors listening to Cæsar. Shall I ride it over them?"

Tros threw his hands behind him, legs apart, as if he stood deciding issues on his own poop.

"Let us hear Fflur. What says Fflur?" he answered.

"Lud! I have been hearing Fflur since—"

Fflur interrupted. She went to Caswallon's side and held his hand, then burst into speech as if a ten-day dam were down, word galloping on word with sobs between:

"He is the best man Britain ever had! Bravest of them all! Generous—too just to every one except himself! They take advantage. Kindness is weakness in a king. He should rule, and he won't! I told him when to kill Skell, but he did not even hunt him out of Britain. Now Skell is back again. They say Caswallon's friends are hunting him. Orwic bade them—"

"I thought of that," said Tros.

"Yes, but it is your fault Skell is living, Tros—yours! You should have killed him when you had the chance. What kind of friend do you call yourself, if you can't slay Caswallon's enemies! Now Orwic says Skell has escaped them. Do you know what that means?"

She paused for breath, mastered a sob-shaken voice, and forced herself to speak with the slow, measured emphasis of tragedy:

"Skell will go—has gone to Black Glendwyr's place. Glendwyr craves Caswallon's shoes. Glendwyr leads the cowards who live by Cæsar's leave. Skell will urge Glendwyr to revolt. He will speak of that Gaulish woman; he will lie about her; he will magnify her rank; he will tempt Glendwyr to win Cæsar's good-will by befriending her and overthrowing you!"

She almost struck her husband, she was so bent on compelling him to understand his danger.

"Glendwyr will say you let the Northmen burn three villages. He will say you sent Tros against Cæsar, to irritate him when you should have sought peace. Father of my sons, Glendwyr will be in arms by to-morrow, with all the malcontents! I know it! I know it!"

"Pray Lud he is!" Caswallon answered.

"What have you done to be ready for him?" Fflur retorted. "Glendwyr has been brewing treason all these months. Did he help us against Cæsar on the beach? Not he! He saved his men to use them against you! Who helped this woman to reach Lunden with such speed? Skell? Whence should Skell get relays of swift horses? I tell you, Glendwyr did it!"

"How do you know that?" Caswallon asked frowning.

"A druid said so."

"Lud rot the druids! They carry tales like kitchen-wenches!"

"The same druid told me that the woman came to Lunden in Glendwyr's chariot," Fflur went on, tight-lipped with anger, her eyes blazing.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"I did. You didn't listen. You were in love with her dark eyes. You said no woman should be refused a hearing and you refused to hear me!"

"Mother of my sons, Lud knows my ears are full of your rebukes," Caswallon answered, comically sorry for himself. "Peace, will you. Silence! Let us hear Orwic."

Orwic looked bored and smiled wanly, as usual when there was reason to be deadly serious, stroking his moustache as if good grooming were nine points of any problem.

"They've looted Skell's house. I think they'll burn it. Skell was gone, though, and they can't find him. Fifty or sixty others have gone, too. I daresay Fflur is right: They may have followed Skell to Glendwyr's place. But that needn't spoil the funeral. Glendwyr lives too far away to interrupt that."

"By Lud! He shall not interrupt it!" Caswallon exclaimed; and Fflur sighed, as if it were no use trying to make her husband recognize danger.

She turned away and left them, making for the room where Tros had installed Helma and all his Northmen with the woman from Gaul under their close surveillance.

There was presently much talk from beyond the wrinkled curtain, while Caswallon, Tros and Orwic stood face to face considering what next to say to one another. They three stood in silence for a long time.

Suddenly Helma came to them, blinking at the sunlight through the great door. Her combed hair hung like spun gold to her waist, lighter and fairer than gold might be, yet not so colorless as flax.

"Marriage or funeral first?" Tros asked. "By your god Lud, Caswallon, I would hate to see you buried in my father's grave. Yet if I were Skell—and if this Glendwyr is the man Fflur thinks he is—there would be more buryings to-night than the druids have prepared for! Yet if you die, they must bury me too, because I like to stand with friends. I would rather leave this girl a widow than dowerless. There is kings' blood in her veins."

He laid a hand on Helma's shoulder.

"My Lord Tros," she said, "you are my protector, and you have done me greater honor than befalls a-many prisoners. A while ago I cried to my brother Sigurdsen to slay you on your own ship. Shall I speak now, or be silent?"

"Speak," said Tros, half-bowing to Caswallon for permission.

"She of Gaul—Cæsar's woman," Helma began, and Caswallon swore under his breath; he was sick of that subject. But Tros pricked his ears. "She combed my hair, swearing she would serve me, speaking presently of Cæsar, and of you, most highly praising you by inference, contrasting you with Cæsar. So, a little at a time, she found out that I know little concerning the Lord Caswallon; and that if I must choose, I should follow you, refusing to acknowledge him. Thereafter for a long time she was silent, while she dressed my hair.

"When she began to speak again she asked about those of my people whom the Lord Caswallon had made prisoners in the fighting in the woods. She knows they are now in a great barn near the stables within the wall that surrounds this house. I think she overheard the command to bring them here.

"She said she supposed I could influence them, and for a while after that she talked of a dozen things—mainly of Gaul and the fate of Cæsar's prisoners.

"Then, when she had done my hair, she sat at my feet making a great show of humility, and cried a little, and then exclaimed how much better destiny had treated me than her, me, who am to be a great sea-captain's wife, and she but a slave.

"But after a while she held my hand, studying the line across the palm, saying darkly I should feel the contrast if the noble Tros were slain before what I hoped should happen.

"So I questioned her, pretending credence in her art of reading what is written in lines on the palm of the hand, although I know such stuff is witchcraft, and a lie invented to entrap fools. Presently, having made much talk of voyages, and money, and—I think she said—five sons, she grew excited and very earnest, saying there was a grave disaster impending, that I might prevent if I were wise enough. And she said there was wisdom written on my palm, but too much overlaid with other lines that signify a willingness to submit to whatever fate may inflict.

"She was very full of guile. It was little by little, holding my hand and forever pretending to read it, that she hinted and then spoke more plainly, and then urged. She said it was written in my hand—mine!—that a revolt is coming, and that you, her protector she called you, would be slain unless I bade the Northmen seize you and carry you to safety elsewhere.

"I questioning, she seemed to go into a trance. She stared at the wall, her body rigid and her breath in gasps. She spoke then of men who will revolt against the Lord Caswallon, intending to slay him and set another in his place. She said my destiny, and yours, and hers lay with the new man, but she did not name him.

"She spoke of to-night's funeral. She said she could see me left in this house with the Northmen and a very small guard of Britons. She said she could see me leading away the Northmen through the woods, guided by her and a Briton, toward men who made ready to attack the Lord Caswallon.

"She said she saw the funeral, and you beside the Lord Caswallon. Men seized you, she said, because she and I insisted, and they bore you off to safety in the woods. But the Lord Caswallon, and the rest, she said they slew.

"Then she came out of the trance and asked me what she had been saying. She said she never can remember afterwards what passed her lips when those strange spells possess her. So I told her what she had said, and she seemed to grow afraid, asserting that a god had spoken through her.

"Then she urged me to be guided by the voice of her trance, saying she understood now what it all meant, how a certain Lord Glendwyr, who had lent her chariot and horses to reach Lunden, would attack the Lord Caswallon and himself become king.

"She said, 'Let us plan so that *all* the Northmen in a band together shall seize the Lord Tros and convey him to safety, since neither you, nor he, nor I, nor the Northmen owe the Lord Caswallon anything, but the Lord Glendwyr will be glad to have us with him.' "

Tros and Caswallon met each other's eyes.

"How long have you known this Northwoman of yours?" Caswallon asked.

"We have all lived many lives and destiny plays with us like pieces on the board," Tros answered. "I know the truth when I hear it."

He drew Helma closer to him in the hollow of his left arm.

"Truth when a woman speaks?" Caswallon answered. *"Phagh!* I grow sick of these cross-purposes! This is but a trick again. Northmen are all liars! This is a plan to gather all the Northmen in one place. They would gain my confidence, then break for liberty. Cæsar's woman has had no time to learn Glendwyr's plans, suppose he has any. And who would trust Glendwyr against me? Not more men than I can snap my fingers at."

He snapped his fingers, then flexed his muscles and threw his shoulders back.

"Give me one good excuse to burn Glendwyr's roost!" he exclaimed.

But Tros grinned. It was an aggravating grin, as he intended that it should be.

"I have heard you say, 'Fflur is always right!'" he answered. "Cæsar's woman has had five days. Cæsar, himself swifter than the wind to snatch advantage, doubtless picked her for her swiftness. Zeus! Have you and I not seen how swift she is! And it may be that Cæsar knew beforehand of Glendwyr's plans.

"Cæsar has spies, and there are Britons who trade back and forth with Gaul, as for instance the Atrebates, who are not your friends, Caswallon. Why, they tell me that half the Atrebates live in Gaul.

"Would it be wonderful if Cæsar should have learned about dissension in your realm? Rome's very life is staked on other folks' dissensions! So is Cæsar's. A dead dog smells the same whichever way the wind blows! If he can keep Rome by the ears, faction against faction, for his own advantage, will he not do it here?"

Caswallon turned and paced the hall a time or two, the blue-veined skin of his face and neck looking deathly white against the hangings. He chewed his moustache; his fingers worked behind his back as if he were kneading the dough of indecision. Tros let go Helma, almost pushed her from him.

"Cast up the reckoning," he said. "Let us strike one woman off against the other, trusting neither. But a third remains. How often have you told me, 'Fflur is always right!' I say, take Fflur's word for it, and look sharply to Glendwyr."

Caswallon stood still, mid-length of the hall.

"It would suit me well to fight him," he said.

And he looked the part.

"Then fight him now," Tros answered. "Glendwyr thinks to-night's obsequies will hold you occupied. Is he mad enough to spare you while your back is turned? To me it looks simple enough."

Caswallon came and stood in front of him, arms folded on his breast.

"Simple?" he said. "How long have you known Britain? Twenty years now I have kinged it, and I—I don't know my Britons yet!"

"If I should stand in your shoes, I would teach them to know me!" Tros retorted. "*Bah!* It is as simple as a mutiny at sea. Pick out the ringleader and smash him. Thus, then Cæsar's woman. Fill her ears. Let her learn by listening when she thinks none watches her, that you and every man you trust will attend the obsequies tonight, leaving this town unguarded.

"I will urge you, in her hearing, to guard the town well; you pooh-pooh it, laughing at me, and bid Orwic gather all your men for the procession. Then help her to escape or let Fflur dismiss her in a fury. Let Fflur give her a chariot and send her to the coast to make her own way back to Cæsar.

"Trust Fflur to put sufficient sting in it to make that plausible. The woman will go to Glendwyr; she will hurry to tell him Lunden is undefended. Good. You postpone the obsequies. You march! You catch Glendwyr unready in the nervous hour between preparation and the casting of the dice. You smite him in the night. Hang him! Hang Skell! Hang the Gaulish woman!

"Pack the three into a box and send it with your compliments to Cæsar. It will smell good by the time it reaches him. Then ride your bit of Britain with a rough hand, drilling, storing arrows, making ready. For Cæsar will invade again, Caswallon, as surely as you and I and Orwic stand here."

"Clever. But you don't know Britain," Caswallon answered. "I am a king, but the druids say their Mysteries are more than kingdoms, even as a man's life is but a spark in the night of eternity.

"They have lighted the fires. They have informed the gods. They have found the right conjunction of the stars and set their altars accordingly. What the druids do, let no man interrupt."

"Lud rot the druids," Orwic muttered.

But he was of a generation younger, that was more impatient with eternity.

"How many men has Glendwyr?" Tros asked.

"Maybe a hundred! Nor will he have more unless he can score an advantage. If I have hard work raising a handful to fight Northmen, what hope has he of raising an army? They might flock to him if he should win a battle, but not otherwise."

"And how many have you?" Tros asked.

"Maybe a hundred. I raised three hundred against the Northmen; but some were killed, some hurt and some have gone home. There will be a thousand in to-night's procession, and as many women, but nine-tenths would run.

"Britons are brave enough, but they say, 'A king should king it!' They leave their king to king it when the trouble starts. However, Glendwyr would never dare to interrupt the druids."

"Have you not watched Glendwyr? Have you no spies?" Tros asked.

"Yes. But my men go home to the feasting when a fight is over, whether they win or lose! Glendwyr's men are feasting, too, I will stake my kingdom on it."

"I have seen kingdoms staked, and lost ere now," said Tros.

Caswallon's indifference puzzled him. He suspected the chief of knowing more than he pretended, and yet, the almost stupid, bored look might be genuine. Orwic looked as bored and careless as Caswallon did.

Tros, both hands behind him, legs apart, considered how he might earn fair profit that should leave him free of obligation to the man who paid.

"I have a bride, a longship and a crew of thirteen men. I need more men," he remarked.

"Lud love me, I can spare none," said Caswallon.

"You have three-and-twenty Northmen prisoners," said Tros, "and they once belonged to my man Sigurdsen. They are no good to you for ransom. They are seamen. They can build ships. I can use them. If Glendwyr should attack Lunden while your back is turned—"

Caswallon smiled, a little grimly, but said nothing.

"—they would naturally help Glendwyr if he turned them loose. But I have Sigurdsen, their former chief. And I have Helma, whom they love. If I should promise them their freedom under me, they would fight at my bidding. Will you give them to me, if I guard you to-night while your back is turned?"

Caswallon stared hard. "Will you not attend your father's obsequies?" he asked.

"That I would dearly love to do," said Tros, "but you are my friend. I think you are in danger. I would rather strike a hard blow for a living man than shed tears following a dead one to the grave. Give me the Northmen."

"What will you do with them?" Caswallon asked.

"I will guard your back to-night."

"You mean, you will dare to hold Lunden Town for me with six-and-thirty men?" Caswallon asked.

He hid his mouth behind his hand as he watched Tros's eyes, and once, for about a second, he glanced at Orwic.

"Aye," Tros answered. "I am no fair-weather friend. As for my father, if he could come from the dead, he would bid me attend to the task of the living and leave comfortably dead men to the druids."

"You are mad, Tros!" said Caswallon. "But I like you, though I did doubt you a while back. You are a fool; Northmen are poor laborers on land. I will give you instead as much land as you can stride the length of on your own feet from dawn to sunset. With Cæsar's gold you can buy mares and cattle. I will give you the gray stallion I bought a month ago from the Iceni. Helma to wife and a holding in Britain, what more do you want?"

"Freedom! A ship and the sea!" Tros answered. "Nay, no bondage to the dirt. Will you give me the Northmen?"

"They are yours." Caswallon nodded. "But you are more mad than a hare in the furrows in spring!"

Nevertheless, he nodded at Orwic as if Tros's bargain suited him, and Orwic smiled behind a hand that stroked his long moustache.

CHAPTER XXXVI

RASH? WISE? DESPERATE? OR ALL THREE?

Trust both friend and enemy—your friend to do his utmost for you and your enemy to do his worst against you; nevertheless, not forgetting that friend and enemy may be one and the same. In no way better than that can ye learn to trust and to mistrust yourselves with unerring judgment.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THERE was a deal of talk still, interrupted by men who came in to ask about the night's procession, and by the servants who set up the long table in the hall, putting benches in place and silver plates for folk of high degree, wooden ones for ordinary mortals. Britons never moved, whether for war or peace, until they had gorged enormously.

"A poor enough wedding feast," Caswallon said. "I would rather you waited, Tros, until—"

Tros interrupted him with one of his deep-sea laughs that rose from somewhere near his middle where the sword hung:

"Until Glendwyr runs me through, and you give Helma to a man who loves horses and pigs? Nay, Caswallon, you shall marry us this day. Then if I die, Helma will be dowered with money and ship, so she may choose, and not be chosen."

He swaggered with his deep-sea captain's gait toward the long room at the rear where all his Northmen lay glooming, their eyes on Cæsar's woman, who sat between Sigurdsen's wife and the widow.

Sigurdsen rose to his feet as Tros entered; he looked as if recovering from too much mead; his eyes were red; his knees shook; a northern gloom possessed him such as grays a winter's sea; but he met Tros's eyes as faith to faith, without emotion.

He would have spoken, but Tros checked him with one of those gestures of confidence that convey more than a hundred words. Sigurdsen sat down again among his men, his back toward a leather-curtained wall.

Tros smiled at Cæsar's woman. She smiled back, remaining seated. She did not glance at Helma, who had followed Tros into the room, but she let Tros see that she understood Helma had told of the palm-reading and the trance. Her liquid eyes were more intelligent than lovely—too alert, too knowing.

Tros out-acted her. Over his bold face there swept such visible emotions as a man might feel who found himself mistaken, who had doubted, to discover that his doubt was wrong, who envied brains more subtle than his own, who held the upper hand, yet felt a diffidence in using it, because he must seek favors of his victim.

There was a vague regret depicted, and a little laughter at the ebb and flow of destiny; a gift of guile that could admire guile, the expression of a clever gambler, losing, who will pay the bet.

"If you stay, Fflur will tear you to pieces!" he said, grinning, stroking his chin, letting the black beard straggle through his fingers.

"I am your slave," she answered.

She laid chin on hands, both elbows on her knees, to watch his face.

He nodded.

"Careless kings are weak friends," he said darkly. "Caswallon cares nothing about you. Fflur will not endure you. You may go. I will send you to Glendwyr's place. Tell Glendwyr I would have come with you, but I attend my father's obsequies. Say, if he takes Lunden before dawn, I will befriend him with six-and-thirty Northmen."

"Noble Tros," she answered, "I will tell Glendwyr how many men guard Lunden, if you inform me."

"None," said Tros, almost whispering.

She stared. He nodded, one arm across his chest, resting the other elbow on it, chin on hand.

"Tell Glendwyr I arranged that. I pay for service rendered, handsomely. You understand me?"

"Noble Tros, I am your slave! You shall be king of Britain and Cæsar's friend, if you will trust me!"

"I judge words by performances," Tros answered. "Come!"

He led her to the stable-yard, where Orwic had a chariot yoked and waiting.

"How far to Glendwyr's place?" he asked her, as if that were an afterthought.

"Four or five hours," she answered. "But Glendwyr waits only three hours' ride away or it may be less. I know the place. His charioteer, who brought me, showed me where the road turns off by a stream in the forest."

"Go fast," said Tros. "Bid Glendwyr hasten. Say, if he fails this night, I will never again trust him. And you likewise! Fail me, and you will find Cæsar a more forgiving man than I! Serve me, and I am more generous than Cæsar!"

Orwic opened a side gate, standing behind it, so that she did not catch sight of him, although her appraising eyes swept every corner of the yard, and Tros was sure she knew the count of chariots that stood pole-upward, the number of restless horses in the long sheds, and how many serfs played kunckle-bones under the eaves.

Those eyes of hers missed nothing, except that Tros laughed when her chariot went plunging through the gate, and that it was Orwic, Caswallon's nephew and his right-hand man, who slammed the gate shut behind her.

"A mare's nest," said Orwic, rather melancholy. "There will be no eggs in it. I know Glendwyr; bold when it pays to lie low, coward at smiting time. If he had come to fight the Northmen, yes, he might have won a following against Caswallon afterward.

"But he lay low then, and he will lie low now, until Caswallon has an army at his back. Then the fool will have at us—Lud help him! He shall lie low then for all time!"

Tros's amber eyes glanced at the sky.

"Northeast wind backing to the north," he answered; but what he meant by that he did not say, any more than he knew what Orwic's air of information in reserve might mean.

He returned to where Helma waited whispering to Sigurdsen. The Northman looked at Tros with new appraisal in his eyes, and actually smiled at last.

"Can he fight?" Tros asked. "Is he fit for an adventure?"

Sigurdsen nodded and talked back to Helma in a singsong growl that sounded like the sea on jasper beaches, but Tros did not wait for all that outburst to be interpreted; when Helma turned to speak he took her by the shoulders and, in short, hurried phrases told her of the plan in mind.

So she told Sigurdsen, and he, laughing, told the others, bidding one of them help him strip off all the bandages that impeded his arms and his huge shoulder muscles.

Tros led the way then toward the yard, but Conops met him in the door, gesturing secrecy, mysterious as if he came from snooping in a graveyard.

"Master! One word!"

"Aye! And I will count the word. Be swift."

Conops drew him back into the room and whispered:

"Master! Women are no good! I know. I never dallied with a woman but she robbed me. That one you have sent away would sell her lover to a press-gang for the price of a drop of scent. This one, this yellow-haired young one will scold you, day in, day out! When she is older she will be like Fflur, who scolds Caswallon until he daren't even drink without her leave, and drinks because she worries him! Master, don't marry her! Don't! Don't! And your father not yet in his grave!"

Tros took him by the neck, laughed, shook him until his teeth clattered like castanets.

"Stand by!" he said. "Stand by! You hear me? Stand by for dirty weather, if you smell the wind! If she should scold me, I will take it out on your hide, little man, you little one-eyed, split-lipped, red-haired, freckled, dissolute, ugly, faithful friend o' mine! Belay advice!

"Out oars, you knife-nasty, wharf-running, loyal old dirty-weather sea-dog! Stow that tongue and stand by me as I endure you, dock-rat, drunkard, shame of the Levant, impertinent, devoted trusty that you are! No back-talk, or I'll break your head! I'll buy a wife for you, and make you keep her! Now, are you satisfied?"

Tros banged his head against the wall by way of clinching argument and strode at the head of his Northmen to the stable-yard, they tramping in his wake like henchmen who had served him since the day they carried arms, with Conops fussing along behind them ragging Sigurdsen because he did not keep step.

But Sigurdsen was too proud to fall into the rhythm of the tramp, and rather too long-legged; also, he was not at all disposed to do what Conops told him, or even to take notice of him, or to admit that he understood.

When they reached the great barn where Caswallon's Northmen were confined, Orwic was waiting and unlocked the complicated wooden contrivance that held the beam in place across the double door. There was no armed guard; the prisoners knew they were safer there than if at liberty until the rage against them should die and Britons resume their usual easy-going tolerance of friend and former foe alike. They were lying in straw, their wounded wrapped in clean white linen.

Those who could rise were on their feet the moment Sigurdsen stood bulked against the light; there were only two who lay still, although a dozen of them had to struggle from the straw, being stiff from painful wounds.

But there was none hurt beyond fairly swift recovery, or he would have been "finished" where he lay on the battlefield as unfit for slavery, half-slavery of service to a British chief, or ransom.

Tros, with Helma next to him, stood at one side of the long barn where the failing sunlight pouring through the door shone on their faces. Sigurdsen, his Northmen at his back, stood facing Tros; and there began such rhetoric as Tros had never heard.

For Sigurdsen's fever had left him and left his brain clear. A beaten chief, hopeless of ransom, Tros had given him far better terms than even over-generous Caswallon would have dared to give.

The Britons would have put him to hard labor for a year or two, a dismal execution overhanging him if he should fail to please; thereafter, little by little, they might have let him rise from serfdom to a holding of his own, half-subject to one of the numerous minor chiefs.

But Tros had offered him a free man's post of honor, second-in-command to Tros himself, and great adventure on the unknown seas.

So Sigurdsen waxed eloquent. The rhythm of the northern sagas rang among the barn-beams as his throat rolled out in Norse a challenge to defeated men to rally to a new prince, Tros of Samothrace, sea-captain without equal, loved of Thor and Odin, brave and cunning, Tros who stood before them, Tros who had claimed the fair-haired Helma, daughter of a hundred kings, to be his bride!

There seemed no stopping him now that he had broken his long silence. He recited Helma's pedigree, commencing in the dim gray dawn of time with mythical half-deities and battles between gods and men. He made the roof-beams ring to the names of heroes and fair-haired heroines whose record seemed to consist exclusively of battlefield betrothals, glittering wedding feasts and death on fields of honor.

He chanted of a golden age when his ancestors were kings, it seemed, of half a universe, with wisemen to support them and defeat the magic of the witches and trolls who counseled enemies, whose only purpose in existence was, apparently, to act as nine-pins for heroes to knock down.

And presently he sang of Tros. His measured, rhythmic prose grew into singsong as imagination seized him, until almost one could hear the harp-strings picking out the tune. He had no facts to hamper him, except the all-important one that Tros had conquered him in single fight and, recognizing a descendant from the gods, had pledged with him faith forever on an oaken poop, "a sea-swept poop, a poop of a proud ship, mistress of the gales, a strong ship, a longship, a ship that Tros, a mighty man in battle, saw and seized—he, single-handed, slaying fifty men!"

He made a pedigree for Tros. He chanted of his black beard and his amber eyes, that were the gift of Odin treasured through endless centuries by high-born women who were born into the world to mate with offspring of a hundred gods. He sang of seas that roared in cataracts across the far rim of the world, where Tros had met strange fleets and smitten them to ruin, "and the bare bones of the the foemen strew the beaches; and the rotting timbers of the wrecks lie broken on the sand!"

He crowded half a century of fighting into Tros's short life, described his father as a "king of kings" who died in battle against fifty thousand men, and ended with a prophecy that Tros would found a kingdom in which kings and queens should be his vassals, and "amber the stuff his cups are made of, platters of gold to eat from."

A hundred sons and grandsons, men of valor, should comb the earth in rivalry of manhood to deserve the privilege of wearing Tros's sword when, "ripe in years and splendor," he should go at last "to where the gods and all his ancestors make merry amid feasting in Valhalla!"

Tros did not understand a word of it, but Helma told him as much as she could remember of it afterward, when they had all done roaring "Hail!" to him and the charioteers and stable-men crowded in the doorway—first with a notion that trouble was brewing and then, because Orwic appeared well pleased—adding their own shouts to the tumult.

All the Northmen kissed Helma and did fealty to Tros, each touching the hilt of his long sword and murmuring hoarse words that sounded like an echo of a longship launching off the ways. There was a roll of thunder in it, and the names of Thor and Odin.

Helma smiled through tears, a gleam of grandeur on her face. But she was serious when she repeated to Tros what Sigurdsen had sung, she walking hand-in-hand with him toward Caswallon's hall, with the Northmen tramping in the rear supporting the wounded between them.

It did not appear to occur to her that there might be any untruth in Tros's pedigree as Sigurdsen unfolded it, or that there might be anything far-fetched in the account of Tros's wanderings and battles at the far rim of the world. That he was not so old as Sigurdsen and could not possibly have done a hundredth part of all that Sigurdsen ascribed to him, meant nothing to her.

She was proud of her new lord beyond the limit of expression, far beyond the commonplace dimensions of such tawdry facts as time and space. She walked beside him worshiping, her young, strong, virgin heart aglow with such emotion as no years can limit.

"Lord Tros," she said. Her voice thrilled. There was vision in her eyes. "My brother saw beyond the veil of things. The gods sang through his mouth. It is honor and joy to me beyond words that I will bear your sons."

Whereat Tros went searching in his mind for words such as he had never used to man or woman, marveling how lame a thing is language and how a tongue, not given to too much silence, can so hesitate between one sentence and another, falling between both into a stammering confusion.

"Whether I be this or that, and a strong man or a weak one, I will do that which is in me, so that you be not sorry if my best may make you glad," he said at last.

And he took comfort from the speech, although it irked him to be picking and choosing, yet to find no proper words. And he did not think of his father at all, although he was conscious that he did not think of him—which would have puzzled him still more if he had pondered it.

The sun went down and servants lighted the oil-fed wicks in long bronze sconces on the wall when they all came to Caswallon's table and the noisy men-at-arms filed in—Caswallon's relatives by blood or marriage, most of them—heaping their arms in the racks in the vestibule and quarreling among themselves for right of place at table.

Some of them had wives who sat each beside her husband, because Fflur was at table, beside Caswallon's great gilded throne-chair that had been pulled forward from under the balcony. Unmarried women served the food, receiving it from serfs at the kitchen door.

Tros sat next to Fflur, with Helma on his right; beyond her, Sigurdsen, his wife and all the Northmen faced curiously amiable Britons, who seemed to think it a good joke to be eating and drinking on equal terms with men whom they had beaten in battle recently. Conops stood behind Tros, selecting the best dishes as they came and snatching them to set before his master.

First came the mead in beakers that the women carried in both hands. Caswallon struck the table with his fist for silence, then, beaker in hand, stood up and made the shortest wedding-speech that Tros—and surely Britain—had ever heard:

"Men of Lunden, we go presently to where the druids speed brave comrades, through the darkness men call death, into a life that lies beyond. And none knows what the morrow shall bring forth; so there are acts that should be done now, lest death first fall on us, like rain that shuts off a horizon. Hear ye all! This is my brother Tros. To him I give this woman Helma to be wife, and all these Northmen, who were mine by victory, to be his faithful men-at-arms and servants. Tros!"

He raised his beaker and drank deep, up-ending it in proof there were no dregs. And when that swift ceremony was complete they all drank, except Tros and Helma, then cheered until the great hall crashed with sound. Fflur, rising, gave a golden flagon into Tros's hands, from which he and Helma drank in turn, Tros finishing the mead with one huge draft that left him gasping when he set the flagon bottom-up. Then he spoke, and was briefer than Caswallon:

"Lord Caswallon, you have named me brother. I abide that name. At your hands I accept this woman. She is my wife. I accept these men. They shall obey me; and, whatever destiny may bring, they shall at least say they have followed one who stood beside his friends in need and kept faith whatsoever came of it!"

Then Tros took the broad gold band from his forehead, and by sheer strength broke it, signifying that a chapter of his life was ended.

He began the next by binding the broad gold around his bride's right arm, she staring at the symbols carved on it and wondering what gods they charged with her protection.

But there were some who murmured it was witchcraft; and a married woman cried aloud that the breaking of the golden circle was an omen of ill luck.

Thereafter Tros had hard work to prevent his Northmen from drinking themselves useless, since the mead flowed without limit and as host Caswallon was too proud to check them.

But Tros imposed restraint by promising the widow-woman to the soberest, whereat Conops, in a panic, began drinking behind Tros's back.

And when the hurried feast was nearly at an end there came a bareback galloper, mud-bespattered, sweating, who burst into the hall and ran to Caswallon's chair, thrusting his head and shoulders between the chief and Fflur. He whispered, but Tros heard him:

"Lord! Make ready to hold Lunden! Glendwyr and two hundred men are marching! They are at the king's stone * by the Thames! They mean to make Glendwyr chief while you stand on a hillside communing with dead men's souls! All Lunden empty! Not a light! No guard at Lud's Gate! They have all gone to the druids' circle!"

"Aye. Why not?" Caswallon answered.

But he glanced at Tros.

"Lord! Stay and fight Glendwyr! He will burn your house!"

"Not he!" Caswallon laughed. "Lud rot him, he would like too well to live in it. Two hundred men, you say? Did you count them?"

"Nay, I rode. But I heard two hundred."

Caswallon laughed again.

"Maybe he rides like us to the burying."

But he glanced at Tros.

"Lord Caswallon, I have warned you. I have done my part."

"Nay, not yet the whole of it," Caswallon answered.

And he looked a third time straight into Tros's eyes, while he wiped his moustache with a freckled, blue-veined hand.

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* Kingston-on-Thames. The old stone in the market-place is nowadays said to be of Saxon origin, but there is no proof it is not druidic and its early history is obscure.

"Take a fresh horse. Ride and find Glendwyr. Bid him meet me at the hillside where the druids wait. Say—there—when the souls of the dead have traveled their appointed path and all the fires die, he and I will meet alone. It will be dawn before the fires die. Say I will fight him for my house and Lunden when dawn rises over the druids' hill."

"He will not believe me."

"Show him this," Caswallon answered; and he pulled a great gold bracelet off his wrist.

But Fflur shook her head and sighed, as if words failed her.

The man would have gone at once to ride his errand, but Tros, who had been whispering to Fflur, leaned behind her and caught the fellow's arm.

"Let him wait. Let him see us all go," he whispered, wrenching at the man's arm so that he swore aloud and struggled, not hearing what was said. "Let him first see me and my men march out with the rest."

Caswallon nodded.

"Wait," he ordered. "Ride when I tell you."

So the man went and sat by the fireside, drinking mead and rubbing a wrist that Tros had come near breaking.

"Caswallon, will you hear me?" Fflur asked.

"Nay, for you are always right," he laughed, "and I know what you will say, Fflur: That the druids rule Britain, which is true enough. But you will tell me I should ride it rough over the druids, which I dare not, right though it may be you are. A druid's neck may break like any other man's, and I could butcher a herd of them, maybe, like winter's beef, but can I convince Britons I am right to do it?

"How long would they be about raising a new king to rule in place of me? The druids would choose that king and be stronger than ever. The druids summoned you, me and all Lunden to the burying to-night. Obey them?

"Nay! I am the king! But I go, nevertheless, and so do you go, and all my men, and all Lunden Town, because a king's throne has four legs, of which the first is a druid; and the second is ceremony; and the third is mystery; and the fourth is common sense. But the druids did not summon Tros, nor any of his men."

He looked hard at Tros again.

"They left that courtesy to me to undertake, and it may be I forgot to mention it!"

He did not wait for Fflur to answer. He rose, gesturing toward the door, through which the sound of stamping stallions came and the crunch of bronze wheels on the gravel drive.

"Now, Tros," he said, "I would not leave you here unless I knew this Glendwyr business is a little matter. And I know, too, that you need a hook on which to hang your coat, as it were, if you are to winter here in Britain. I need a good excuse to lend you house and countenance in spite of jealousy and tales against you.

"So—Glendwyr is no great danger but he will serve your end. If he has fifty men, that is more than I think; and the half of those will run when the first one yells as a spear-point pricks him at Lud's Gate! Glendwyr counts on Lunden turning against me, if he can steal my house. Take care then that he never enters it! For my part, I will let the men of Lunden know you saved their town for them to-night when their backs were turned!"

Tros answered him never a word.

"Is he a rash fool, or so wise he can laugh at rash fools, or a desperate king with druids on his neck, or all three things at once?" he wondered.

But Caswallon marched out looking like a man who understood all the rules of the game of "kinging it."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE BATTLE AT LUD'S GATE

I have spoken unto weariness. Yet now this! Listen, ye who heard, yet heard not. It is manlier to slay and to be slain then to escape by cowardice from dangers that a little Wisdom could have taught you to avoid. Aye, to the shambles with you! To the houghing! Return not for pity to me if ye run from the terror that ye have brought upon yourselves. A coward is a mocker of his own Soul.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

TROS gathered his Northmen, the wounded and all, for they could eat and drink and walk, whatever else might ail them, and, with Helma at his side, brought up the rear of the procession behind fifty chariots that swayed in the crimson glare of torches held by men on foot.

Far away to the northwestward, beyond the forest and the marsh, there was a crimson glow against the sky, where druids' fires burned; and all the distance in between was dotted with the irregular glow of torches where the folk of Lunden and the neighboring villages formed one continuous stream.

"Zeus! Those druids have the Britons by neck and nose!" Tros muttered. "Would my father have asked burial at the risk of a man's throne? Not he! He would have ordered them to throw his body on a dung-heap, and defend themselves. If he is not too busy in another world, he will forgive me for not attending his funeral."

The long procession filed through the circle of solemn yew-trees, where the altar was on which a daily sunrise sacrifice was laid; and there Tros halted, gathering his men around him, bidding Helma explain his plan to Sigurdsen:

"Now we march back. One has ridden to warn Caswallon's enemies that his house is empty and the town unguarded. He saw us all march away, and though that man is Caswallon's friend, the information will leak out of him like the smell of strong wine through a bottle-neck. There is none in Lunden, save the fire-guard, a few old women and, it may be, a handful of drunken fishermen down by the riverside."

"Who is the fire-guard?" Sigurdsen asked; for he knew next to nothing of Britons, except that they were not fit to be reckoned with at sea, although great fighters on horseback and on foot in their forests.

"They," said Tros, "are about a score of old men, who sleep by day and are supposed to patrol by night. This night, instead of snoring in the watchhouse, they shall serve a purpose. Conops! Go find the fire-guard. Wake them. Keep them awake. See that each cripple of them arms himself with two good torches. Hide them within Caswallon's wall, with a small fire handy at which to light the torches swiftly when I blow three blasts somewhere near the town gate.

"When I do that, make all the noise possible and run downhill toward the gate, as if at least fifty of you were coming to my aid. If the running kills them they will die in a good cause, so spare none. No talk now! Go about your business! Hurry!"

"How much of a fight is this to be?" asked Sigurdsen. "A third of us are stiff with wounds."

He flexed his own great muscles, but it hurt him.

"Neither more nor less than any fight," Tros answered. "Tell him, Helma, that a man does what he can do, and neither gods nor men should ask more or expect less!"

He saw that nothing could be gained by telling Sigurdsen how great the danger was. The Northmen had too recently been beaten to thrill at any thought of a forlorn hope. He must make them think their task was easy; so he led off, whistling to himself.

And first he returned to Caswallon's house to rifle the great racks of arms that lined a storeroom near the hall. There was no guard, no lock. He laughed as he served out bows and arrows, laughed again, as he thought of that gold he had won from Cæsar.

Fflur was supposed to be guarding it. It was probably under her bed! He wondered where Caswallon's own treasure lay, all the golden money coined in the mint at Verulam.*

"Honesty, unless all other men are honest, is no better than Achilles' heel," he reflected. "Britons are madmen. Caswallon is the maddest of them all!"

He marched his men out through Caswallon's gate slowly, because some limped and had to lean on others, and downhill between the neat, fenced houses, leaving Sigurdsen's wife and the widow-woman with orders to attach themselves to Conops' torch brigade. But Helma he kept with him, since he had no other means of instructing his men.

They marched into a creeping gray mist ascending from the river, that made trees and houses loom like ghost-things from another world.

Except that once or twice a tied hound bayed at them and cows lowed in the barns as they went by, there was no sign of life until they reached Lud's Gate with the wooden bridge beyond it.

There was a guardhouse built of mud and timber either side the gate, but no lights and only one man fast asleep on a bench within an open guardhouse door. When Tros wakened him he said he was there to entertain belated strangers, and he pulled out a bag of roasted wheat, supposing that Tros and his men wished food and lodging for the night.

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* Nowadays known as St. Albans.

He was a very old man, trembling with the river ague, but Tros pressed him into service since he admitted that he knew every nook and corner of the sparsely wooded land that lay beyond the bridge.

Tros decided not to close the town gate. It was ajar when he arrived, because the old man was too thoughtful of his ague to wish to struggle with it if a stranger should seek admittance. Tros flung it wide and lighted the bronze lamps in both guardhouse windows, so that any one coming would know there was no obstruction and might elect to ride full pelt across the bridge.

The wall reached either way into obscurity. It was a thing of mud and lumber, useless against battery, but too high for an enemy to waste time climbing if he should see a gap that he might gallop through. Beyond, were occasional clumps of trees that loomed through the drifting mist, a low gurgle from the swamps at the river edge, and silence.

"Now," said Tros to Helma, "you shall be a widow on your bridal night, or else shall wife it with a man who stands firm in one king's favor! It seems to me the Britons are all fools, not alone Caswallon. So I think this man who comes to seize Caswallon's throne is no whit wiser than the rest. If I am wrong, then you are as good as married to a dead man! But we shall see."

He took Helma and the old guardhouse man across the bridge with him, ignored a clump of trees and undergrowth—since any fool might look for an ambush there—and, after ten minutes' stumbling over tufted ridge and muddy hollow, chose a short stretch of open country where the road crossed what apparently was level ground.

But he noticed it was not actually level; mist and darkness were deceptive. Fifty feet away to one side the smooth, grazed turf was half a man's height higher than the road, and from that point it fell away again into a mist-filled hollow. He could have hidden a hundred men there.

He glanced at the town gate, wide, inviting. Lamplight shone across the opening, blurred by fog, and he whistled contentedly as he realized what a glare Conops' torches would make, seen from that viewpoint through the lighter mist uphill. But there was something lacking yet.

"If they come they will come in a hurry. They will charge the open gate. They will get by before we can check them."

He observed again. On his left hand, almost exactly midway between his chosen ambush and the town gate, was the clump of trees and undergrowth that looked like such a perfect lurking place.

"Helma," he said, pointing to it, "take this old skinful of ague and hide yonder in the trees. I will give you the three worst-wounded men as well, and there is flint and tinder in the guardhouse. When the enemy comes abreast of me—for I will hide here along with Sigurdsen and all the others—you strike flint on steel and make a good noise in the bushes. If that does not check them, light a torch or two."

"I would liefer die beside you," Helma answered.

"You will do my bidding," Tros retorted, and she said no word to that.

So Tros went for his Northmen, putting the three most badly wounded, along with the old gate-house-keeper, in Helma's charge; and them he hid carefully in the clump of trees, showing them precisely between which branches to make their sparks and how to thrash the undergrowth; but as to the proper time to do that, he trusted Helma.

"Wife or widow!" he said, throwing an arm around her, laughing gruffly, for he had a long road yet to travel before he would trust the gentler side of him. "Do your part and I will do mine. So the gods will do theirs; for they like to see men and women prove themselves!"

With that he left her to her own devices and tramped away with Sigurdsen, the other Northmen following; and presently he hid them all on the shoulder of the slope above the road, where even if mounted men should spy them from the higher level of horse or chariot, their heads would look like tree-stumps in the midst. He was careful to space them at unequal intervals, not in a straight line.

But the Northmen were nervous. They had drunk too much and had been told too little; nor had they any interest in fighting, except that they would rather, for their own sakes, please Tros than offend him. It was hard to keep them quiet, although Sigurdsen went down the line whispering hoarsely, rebuking, even striking them. They complained of their wounds and the chill night air, repeatedly crowding together for warmth, protesting that the turf was damp, yet neglecting to keep their bow-strings dry.

Then a stallion neighed not far away; another answered, which sent the shivers up Tros's spine. Orwic had told him which way Glendwyr must come if he should come at all; but those stallions were somewhere behind him, whereas the road spread in front to left and right until it turned away through distant trees and followed the riverbank.

His next trouble was that the Northmen, even Sigurdsen, grew sleepy; some of them snored and he had to throw stones at them. All of them were half asleep when he caught the sound of horsemen in the distance; and it was the sound of so many horses that he feared for one long minute his chilled, indifferent men would welcome panic and take to their heels.

But Sigurdsen sensed the panic and stood up, swearing he would die beside Tros. Tros had to force him down again before the advance guard of what seemed to be at least a hundred horsemen began looming through the mist. Then, to the rear again, three horses neighed; but it sounded strangely as if the neighing were half-finished, smothered. Some of the advancing horses answered it, but there was no reply.

"Zeus, we are in for it!" Tros muttered to himself. "A hundred coming--more! Another lot behind us waiting to join them! No quarter! Horsemen front and rear! Well, there's a laugh in everything. My Northmen have nowhere to run! Zeus! What a mad fool Caswallon must be, to leave me and this handful to defend all Lunden!"

He took a long chance, crept along the line to see that bow-strings were all taut, shaking each man as he passed, growling orders that accomplished more because the Northmen could not understand a word he said. If they had understood him they might have tried to argue.

The leading horsemen riding slowly, peering to left and right, drew nearly abreast of the ambush. One of them turned and shouted. At least a hundred in the mist along the road began cantering to catch up.

Helma heard that. Her sparks flashed and there began a crashing in the underbush, just as the advance guard began to spur their horses to a gallop. They saw, heard, drew rein again, began shouting to the men behind; and in a moment there was a milling mass of men and horses, those ahead pressing back into an impatient orderless squadron that came plunging into them. A mêlée of ghosts in the mist! Somewhere away behind Tros stallions neighed again.

Shouts, yells, imprecations, argument. And into that Tros loosed his Northmen's arrow-fire! He could hear the clatter of bronze wheels and the thunder of hoofs now. He knew he was between two forces, one careering from behind him to make junction with the other. He blew three bugle blasts that split the night and watched for Conops' torches, heard an answering bugle blast, and saw them come pouring through Caswallon's gate, a splurge of angry crimson, whirling and spreading in the mist.

"Shoot! Shoot! Shoot into the mass!"

He seized a bow and arrows from a man who did not understand him and launched shaft after screaming shaft into the riot, where fallen horses kicked and men cursed, none sure yet whence the arrows came and each man yelling contrary advice, as some fell stricken and some saw the torches coming downhill.

Tros's men were on their knees to take advantage of the shoulder of the rise; from in front they were hardly visible. But Sigurdsen saw the havoc they had wrought already, heard the thunder of hoofs and wheels approaching from behind, sensed climax and rose to his full height, roaring. No more bow for him! He dropped the thing and stood in full view, whirling his ax, bull-bellowing his men to charge and die down there at handgrips with the Britons!

The Northmen rallied to him in a cluster on the ridge. No more bows and arrows if they had to die; they drew swords and axes.

Tros, since he had lost control of them, took stand by Sigurdsen and sent one final shaft death-whining into the mob before trying to face his party both ways. The chariots were almost on them from behind, hoofs and wheels, no shouting, din deadened by the turf.

Three-score men in the road had rallied somehow, saw Northmen's heads against the skyline, spurred their panicky horses and wheeled to charge uphill. But even as they wheeled, a squadron of chariots hub-to-hub came thundering through the night on Tros's right hand and crashed into the riot in the road, a wave of horsemen following and then another. Before Sigurdsen could lead his men ax-swinging into that confusion, where they could never have distinguished friend from foe, the half of Glendwyr's men were in headlong flight, hard followed. It was over in sixty seconds.

Tros beat his Northmen back with the flat of his sword-blade, until Helma came breathless and, clinging to Sigurdsen, screamed at them all to let the Britons fight among themselves. But nobody quite understood what had happened, until Caswallon loomed out of the mist, drawing rein, resting one foot on the wooden rim above the chariot's wickerwork.

"Brother Tros," he said, "did you think I would leave you in the dark to guard my back? By Lud, no! Kinging it means trusting enemies to do their worst and watching friends lest they suffer by being friends! I told you this would be a little matter; but it was no small thing for you to prove you are my friend and not Cæsar's!"

"You came between block and knife!" said Tros, his foot on the hub of the wheel.

"Not I! Didn't you hear my stallions squeal before we silenced them? Have you seen Glendwyr?"

The chariot horses reared and shied, and Tros had to jump clear of the wheel before he could answer, for Conops came rushing up, torch in hand, and all the king's horses or all the king's men meant nothing to him until he knew Tros was safe.

But when he had thrust the torch close to Tros's face and made sure there were no wounds, he thought of loot and vanished in the direction where the loot might be. There was a glare of torchlight in the town gate, where his breathless veterans stood hesitating, doubtful, ready to welcome whichever side was victor.

Then a shout out of the darkness, Orwic's voice: "We have the young Glendwyr!"

Orwic's chariot, crowded with five or six men, drew up beside Caswallon's. Three men were holding one. He struggled. But he ceased to struggle when they dragged him from the chariot and stood him close to Tros beside Caswallon's wheel. In a minute the whole party was surrounded by dismounted horsemen, whose held horses kicked and bit while their owners clamored for young Glendwyr's death.

But Caswallon waited, tugging his moustache, until the clamor died; it was not until men hardly breathed, and they had somehow quieted the horses, that he spoke to the prisoner suddenly, and when he did speak his voice had a hammer-on-anvil note.

"You hear what these say. Where is your father?"

"Dead!"

The youngster's voice was insolent, hoarse with anger. He was possibly eighteen, but it was not easy to see his face because the mist came drifting like smoke on a faint wind and the torchlight cast fantastic shadows, distorting everything.

He had black hair that fell on to stalwart shoulders, and he stood straight, with his chin high, although two men held his arms behind him and were at no pains to do it gently.

"How did he die? When?" Caswallon asked.

The youngster answered scornfully, as if Caswallon, not he, were the accused:

"Lud's mud! You are the one who should ask that! You, who sent Cæsar's woman to him! You who sent a lying messenger to challenge him after her dagger had done its work!"

"Lud knows I would have fought him!" Caswallon answered pleasantly enough.

"You! You lie! You sent word to him to meet you at the Druid's Hill, and a woman to make sure he should never reach there!"

"Like father, like son," Caswallon answered. "If your father is dead, why didn't you ride to fight me in his place, instead of sneaking through the dark to loot my Lunden Town? I have caught you in your father's shoes. But how did he die?"

"I say she stabbed him!"

Caswallon made a hissing sound between his teeth.

"Where is she now?" he demanded; and the youngster chose to misinterpret the flat note of dissatisfaction in his voice.

"Aye," he sneered back, "she has earned Fflur's place! But you will have to win her first from Skell! Lud's mud! If there is any manhood in you, fight me before Skell comes with a dagger for your back!"

"Boy, I would have fought your father gladly, or you in his place," Caswallon answered. "I am vexed not to have slain him. But as for you now, you will do well to bridle impudence. You are not free, so you have no right to challenge any one."

"Lud's blood!" the youngster swore, "I came to burn your house! I'll ask no mercy!"

He spat, and a Briton close beside him would have struck him in the face, but Caswallon prevented that:

"Let him be. He has fire in his brain. Boy, I will not kill you, nor shall any woman kill you while you are at my charge. Will you lie in fetters until some foreign ship puts in needing rowers? Or shall I give you to my friend Tros?"

The youngster nearly wrenched his two guards off their feet as he turned to glare at Tros, whose amber eyes met his and laughed at him.

"Be still, boy," Tros advised him. "If I say no to this, you will die of scurvy on some Phœnician's deck, or else be sold to be chained to an Egyptian oar."

The youngster bit a word in two and swallowed half of it. He did not like to be laughed at, but it had only just begun to dawn on him that he was lawfully Caswallon's property, a prisoner caught in the act of rebellion, henceforth with no more rights than if he had been born a slave, not even the right to be hanged or burned alive.

"How many prisoners are taken?" Caswallon asked in a loud voice, and there was some calling to and fro through the mist before Orwic answered.

"Nine-and-thirty; also a dozen or fourteen who are hurt so they will not live."

"Brother Tros, how many will you need to build and man this ship your heart desires?" Caswallon asked.

"Ten score, at the least," Tros answered.

Caswallon laughed.

"Well, you have your Northmen and now nine-and-thirty Britons, forty of them counting young Glendwyr. Maybe my men will catch a few more rebels for you. However, a man needs enemies, so they shall let some go. Boy, you belong to my brother Tros, but all your father's lands and property are mine."

Young Glendwyr hung his head and the men who held him would have tied his wrists if Tros had permitted; but Tros put two Northmen in charge of him, which stung the youngster less than if he had been tied, and mocked, by his own countrymen. Caswallon sent the other prisoners into Lunden under guard, to await Tros's disposition.

"For the wine of excitement might go to your head if I should leave you in charge of them to-night, Tros. You might try your own turn at seizing Lunden!"

"Lunden is a good town, but it would irk me to have to govern it," Tros answered.

Caswallon laughed, turning his head to listen to sounds approaching through the mist; wheels, hoofs and a voice.

"Pledge me your promise," he said suddenly.

Tros hated promises, like all men who habitually keep them. He regarded a blind promise as stark madness. Yet there was madness in the mist that night, and all rules went by the board. He heard a gasp from Conops, somewhere in the mist behind, as he raised his right hand and swore to do whatever service Caswallon might demand of him.

He could see Caswallon whispering to Orwic, and Orwic passing word along, but it was Conops who gave him the first inkling that he might be called on that night for performance; Conops, and then Helma, seizing his hand and pressing close against him. Conops said:

"Master, he will make a fool of you! Take back that promise before he—"

Helma said:

"Lord Tros, *I* am your wife, is it not so? This is my night. Will you—"

Sounds in the mist interrupted, sounds that included one familiar voice. A chariot emerged into the torch glare, horses snorting clouds of vapor as they slid to a thundering halt, all feet together; and the first face Tros recognized was Fflur's, the torchlight in her eyes. It was she who drove, who reined the horses in, her hair all fury on her shoulders.

"I have them both," she remarked.

Her voice was flat—determined. There were issues in the mist that night.

A chariot behind hers plunged to a standstill and Tros saw Cæsar's woman's face, white in the mist, with Skell's beside hers; and Skell looked like a ghost from beyond the borderland of death, with such fear in his eyes as a beast shows in the shambles. His arms were tied so taut behind him that his breast seemed ready to burst and the sinews of his neck stood out like bowstrings.

"Now prove you are a king, Caswallon! Do a king's work!" Fflur said; and her voice was flat again, no music in it.

"I will," Caswallon laughed. "Bring them. I am good at kinging it!"

But Fflur appeared to doubt that; she watched like an avenging fury while men dragged Skell and the Gaulish woman from the chariot and stood them in front of Caswallon, where he considered both of them a minute without speaking.

Then suddenly he raised his voice, and though he spoke to all present it was plain enough that his words were aimed at Fflur:

"Shall a king protect men's property, or shall he squander it?"

All knew the answer to that. None spoke, not even Fflur, although she bit her lip.

"Shall a king offend the druids, or shall he abide their teachings?" Caswallon asked, speaking loud and high again.

They knew the answer to that, too. None spoke except the Gaulish woman. She cried aloud:

"Not the druids! Kill me!"

Then she began screaming, and a man clapped a cloth over her mouth, desisting when she grew calm.

"As for this woman," Caswallon said, "she was Cæsar's slave, and she now belongs to Tros—my brother Tros."

The woman flung herself sobbing in the mud at Tros's feet, clinging to his legs, crying to him:

"Lord Tros—mercy! I knew you were for the Lord Caswallon! I stabbed the Lord Glendwyr lest he should slay you! I am your slave! My knife is yours! My life is yours!"

"Be still," Tros ordered gruffly.

He knew predicament was coming, needed all his wits to meet it. Emotion, such as she showed, angered him, and in anger there is not much wisdom.

"As for Skell, what say the druids?" asked Caswallon, raising his voice louder than before.

There was a murmur at that, but Skell was speechless; fear held him rigid, the whites of his eyes glistening. Caswallon spoke again, his head a little turned toward Fflur:

"The druids say, a good deed is for men to repay—evil deeds are for the gods to punish. What say you?"

There was murmuring again, but no words audible. Fflur's lips were white with pressure, and her eyes blazed as Caswallon turned to face her:

"Mother of my sons," he said, "this Skell was once a friend of mine. He helped when Lunden burned. He helped rebuild it. Shall I slay?"

Fflur answered him at last, thin-lipped, breathing inward:

"You will never listen to me! It must be your decision!"

"Nay," he answered, laughing, "you are always right! What shall I do with him?"

"Do what you will! You are the king!" she answered angrily.

Caswallon laughed again.

"True. I should not forget I am the king!"

"You let other men forget it," Fflur retorted.

"Skell shall remember!" Caswallon turned from her and looked straight at Tros. "Brother Tros, you have told me you will build a ship, for which you will need a great crew. Just now you have made me a promise to do whatever I choose to ask. Was that in good faith?"

"It was my spoken word," said Tros; but he answered guardedly—he did not care to be public executioner, even of such a treacherous sneak as he knew Skell was.

"Then take Skell! He is your slave! Use him. Set him on an oar-bench and sweat the treason out of him! Work manhood in, for that must come from outside, since what he had of it he seems to have lost!"

Fflur laughed, high-pitched and cynical. Skell looked at Tros as a tied steer eyes the butcher.

"Slave?" he said, wetting his lips with his tongue. "I was born free. Oar-bench?"

"Aye!" Tros answered. "Loose him, lest his arms grow weak. I will keep that promise," he said, grinning at Caswallon. "His hands shall blister and his hams shall burn. If he has freedom in him, he shall earn it!"

So they loosed Skell, and the Northmen took charge of him with low-breathed insults, despising him as neither Norse nor Briton, but a traitor to both races, speaking both tongues. Tros, arms behind him, stared at the Gaulish woman, who was kneeling in the mud.

"Mine?" he wondered. "Mine? By Pluto, what should a seaman do with you?"

And Caswallon chuckled, waiting. The woman tried to smile, but fear froze her again when Helma stood beside Tros, taking his hand to remind him of her rights.

"I shall need no wench to wait on me!" said Helma.

"You shall go to Cæsar," Tros said finally. "You shall take my message to him.

"You shall say: 'Whatever Tros needs that Cæsar has, Tros will take without Cæsar's leave or favor!'

"Bid him send me no more slave-women, but guard himself against a blow that comes! And lest you lie about that message, woman, I will chisel it on bronze and rivet that to a chain around your neck."

"So! Then this business is over," said Caswallon. "The druids wait. Send your Northmen back to Lunden with your prisoners, Tros. We must make haste."

He signed to the Northmen to take the prisoners away, and offered Tros and Helma places in the chariot beside him, then shouted to the team and drove like a madman through the mist.

He said not another word until the horses leaped a stream and the bronze wheels struck deep into the far bank; then, when they breasted a mist-wreathed hill beneath dripping branches and he had glanced over-shoulder to make sure Fflur followed, and Orwic, and a score of mounted men behind their chariots, he tossed speech to Tros in fragments:

"Too many druids, not enough king. If druids keep me waiting, men say 'Hah! even Caswallon must cool his heels!' But if I keep them waiting, they say 'Caswallon is irreligious!' Nevertheless, unless I king it carefully there will be neither king nor druids! And the druids know that. They must wait for me. And I think that dawn is a better time for funerals than midnight, because at dawn men hope, whereas at night they are afraid.

"So, Brother Tros, you shall attend your father's funeral after all, and all my people shall believe you are my friend. I will bid the druids thank you that Lunden wasn't plundered while they prayed! On ye horses! Ho, there! Hi! Hi-yi! Which is the hardest, brother Tros, to king it or to captain a ship at sea?"

"That I know not," Tros answered. "But I will build my ship by your leave. I know not which is harder, to build ship or kingdom. Only I know which task I choose."

"Hew your timber, lay your keel and build. You have Cæsar's gold," said Caswallon.

"Aye, and I know Cæsar. He has sharp eyes—long ears. His spies—"

"Leave spies to me to deal with."

Tros fell silent, thinking of oak and iron nails and cordage—of tools, food, housing and a thousand other necessities. He would get them all. He would build. But the getting and building, he knew, would soon reach Cæsar's ears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WINTER, NEAR LUNDEN TOWN

A guest, no matter who nor whence, is sacred, be he friend or enemy. I tell you an eternal Law, which if ye break by thought or word or deed shall shut you away from safety in the day of peril. When ye open the door to admit the stranger, open the heart also and turn out guile and malice, lest your guest, if he discover them within you, mock your hospitality and call it by its right name, Cunning.

Ye say, what though if a guest have guile and malice?

I say, let him. I am old, but not in my day, nor in my father's day before me, has treachery been known to bring forth comfort for him who hath it in his heart.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

The clearing in the forest rang with the noise of adze-blow and hammer on anvil. An eight-yoke bull-team swayed and floundered at a felled oak, hauling it amid a riot of shouts and whip-cracks toward the sawing scaffold, where a Northman overseer bellowed with rage at Britons' notions of a straight cut. Tros, looking older, because he was calm with the intensity of patient anger forced by will to subserve energy, sat in his usual place on a log in mid-clearing. He had a lump of charcoal in his fist, and a board beside him. He was too well aware of the Britons' rules of hospitality to be less than courteous to a Roman envoy introduced by Caswallon. But he kept interrupting the conversation to draw joints and fastenings, and to write measurements on the board, using the British inch and a system of circles and dots to mark numbers of inches. He allowed no sign to escape him that the Roman's conversation was an irritating interruption, or that he suspected the Roman of any hidden design.

"The Greeks," he said at last, "have a word for it." Greek was his native tongue, but he liked to speak of Greeks as foreigners. That, of course, meant nothing to Caswallon, who was watching a groom take hot pitch from a Northman's cauldron and apply it to a cut on a horse's foreleg. But the Roman's eyes smiled.

"The Greeks call it *nous,*" Tros continued. "It means more than knowledge."

His amber eyes thoughtfully studied the Roman who sat, with loosely buckled breast-plate and his helmet on his knees, on the butt end of an oak log facing him; but he spoke at Caswallon, as the Roman understood. It was gray twilight, snow about to fall. Appearances were deceptive in that half-light. Tros looked the oldest, the Roman youngest because the gray over his temples did not show and he was clean-shaven. But the fact was the other way. Marcus Marius was fifty; Tros, black-bearded, hardly more than half his age.

"We Romans call it virtue, which is courage. The Greeks are like women, good at words," said Marius. "I have fought Greeks from the Piræus all the way north into Macedonia. I sailed with Pompey the Great against the pirates, of whom more than half were Greeks. We beat them easily, talking less, but hitting harder."

"Fight me. See if your virtue is greater than mine," Tros suggested, his white teeth showing in a grin of great good humor.

"No," said Marius. "I may have to fight you some day. This time let us talk and see which has the better of it. If you have what the Greeks call *nous,* which is something they talk about but haven't, you will understand me easily enough."

"Talk on," said Tros.

Caswallon sighed. He had heard too much talk—as, for instance, from Fflur, the mother of his sons. He began to stride up and down within earshot, six paces this way and six the other with his hands behind him, while his blanketed chariot-horses stamped impatiently, a wolf-skin-clad groom squatting under their noses, twenty yards away.

Firelight shone between the tree-trunks near by. The woods were full of the echoing din of hammer blows, the snore of rip-saws and occasional shouting in a tongue the Roman did not understand. He had to speak loud and in Gaulish because Tros had refused to have any conversation with him without witnesses, and Caswallon knew no Latin.

"I will speak first of Cæsar," said Marius, and again Tros grinned, but Caswallon began to knead his fingers nervously behind his back.

"Why?" said Tros. "I know Cæsar already. So does the Lord Caswallon."

"I have heard others make that same boast," Marius answered. "Yet I, who am older than Cæsar, who have served under him in Gaul and in Hispania, who have been in his household in Rome, who have traveled with him to Bythinia and back, who have lived with him in exile and have shared dry bread with him on many a campaign, am not so sure I know him. Two or three times you have had the best of him. I have heard it was you who wrecked his fleet when we invaded Britain and you who all but captured him at Seine-mouth. But were you never stung by a wasp?"

Marius picked up a stick and struck the log on which he sat, to illustrate a wasp's fate, then continued:

"Cæsar was captured by pirates once. That was long ago, near Pharmacusa, when he was hardly more than a boy. I was with him. They were a blood-thirsty pack of swine, and they demanded twenty talents' ransom.* 'Not enough,' said he. And while we who were with him feared for our lives and his, he laughed at those pirates for fools who did not know Cæsar's value. 'I will give you fifty talents' ransom,' said he, 'and that price will be nevertheless, too little.'

"Thereafter, while all of his party but the two of us and one slave, who remained in the pirates' camp with him, went to raise the ransom money, Cæsar ruled those pirates as if they were his prisoners, not he theirs. He took part in their games, he made love to their women and he made them listen to his own writings that he read aloud, they wondering and he assuring them they were fools who could not appreciate a priceless privilege. When he wished to sleep he ordered them to keep silence, which they did, treading on tiptoe and striking whoever disturbed him. When the ransom money came at last—fifty talents! Think of that!—he paid it, promising he would come back soon and crucify them all.

"He was very young and they laughed, even as just now you laughed when I mentioned Cæsar's name. They knew he had no authority. He was an exile. He had no army, no fleet, not many friends. They did not even trouble themselves to move away from Pharmacusa, but sent two of the talents for precaution's sake as a present to Junius who, in those days, was governor of Asia and in a too great hurry to grow rich. But Cæsar, I with him, went to Miletus, whence the ransom had come. He had a few friends in Miletus. There he assumed authority, and there was none who saw fit to challenge it although, as I say, he was a young man and without much influence. He manned some ships that lay there, impressing freemen in the name of Sylla, who was all-powerful in Rome in those days and had proscribed him. He descended on those pirates as the dawn steals on the night, and caught them all, with all except two talents of the fifty he had paid them. He kept the money, but he threw the pirates into jail in Pergamus.

"Then he went to see Junius, I with him again, but Junius had already received two talents from the pirates and his appetite was keen for more, so he said he would consider at his leisure what punishment should be imposed. He was a mean Etruscan with a long nose and the kind of sneer that has cost many a man his fortune. Cæsar can sneer, but never that way. Junius asked by what authority Cæsar had taken ships and men from Miletus, and in whose name.

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* Plutarch's *Life of Cæsar.*

"So Cæsar took very courteous leave of him, answering that he would keep a promise while Junius considered at his leisure what his duty might be. And he returned to Pergamus, where he crucified every one of the pirates. He always keeps promises. But because they had been civil to him while he was their prisoner he showed them mercy by ordering their throats cut before they were tied to the trees. Thereafter he wrote to Rome and made use of a talent or two for the hastening of the end of Junius' career. All fail, who oppose Cæsar. He would have been Junius' friend, had Junius supported him."

"You suggest I am a Junius?" asked Tros.

The thought seemed to amuse him.

"No. But you might be a greater than Junius. You are a pirate.* Cæsar would have befriended those pirates had they sought his friendship and promised to desist from piracy, even as Pompey the Great befriended all the pirates who surrendered to him in his war against them. Cæsar and Pompey are great ones and great friends at present, Pompey lending men to Cæsar for his work in Gaul, each meanwhile courting the wealth of Crassus, who fears them both. But men are saying the world is hardly big enough to hold all three, Cæsar, Pompey and Crassus. The time comes soon when each of the three will be seeking every friend he can depend on and the world will split in three, if my judgment amounts to anything."

"What if I am Pompey's friend?" Tros asked. "You call me pirate. I have Pompey the Roman's written leave to sail where I please. Cæsar gainsaid that. He burned my father's ship. He beat the crew to death. My father died from torture."

"You were none of you Roman citizens," the Roman interrupted. "Rome puts no such indignity on Romans."

He held his chin high while he said that, and the firelight through the trees shone on a proud face. Rome was his religion.

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* In those days practically any sailor was a pirate who did not acknowledge Roman sea supremacy.

"Better be Cæsar's friend and become a Roman citizen. I tell you, Cæsar can procure that honor for you."

"Pompey could have done the same," Tros answered. "I refused it. I am a lord of Samothrace."

"Bah!" said the Roman. "What is Samothrace? An island, a spot of an island in a rocky sea. The pirates plundered it. No army, no revenue, nothing."

"Nothing that you can understand. Nothing there for Cæsar," Tros retorted. "Never was a foreign ruler there, and never will be!"

"No harbor, no houses, no commerce, not even a tree!" said the Roman, his eyes wandering among the giant oaks around him.

They were martial, appraising eyes. He appeared to be mentally figuring in terms of baulks of timber that would serve to build redoubts or batter down an enemy's.

From out of the trees into the clearing came a score of fair-haired Britons armed with spears and handsomely clad in furs against the wintry wind that made the Roman shiver now and then. The furs had jeweled clasps. Several carried dead wolves on their shoulders and two had a boar hung between them on a spear. They greeted Caswallon noisily, but he took scant notice of them. Then a horn blew and there began a great commotion in the gloom a hundred yards away behind Tros's back. The hammering and the sawing ceased, but there was a noise of footsteps and laughter and, by the thump, it might be of tools and odds and ends being stowed in boxes for the night.

"It is cold here," said the Roman, pointedly.

He buckled up the bronze armor to his throat, but there was not much warmth in that. Wind sighed through the trees, and the great fires, glowing crimson hardly a hundred yards away, looked cheerful and inviting.

Caswallon came and stood, legs apart, his back half-turned toward the Roman. He said nothing, but he met Tros's eyes and jerked his head in the direction of the firelight with an uplift of the eyebrows and a questioning smile. Tros answered the unspoken thought:

"What can one more spy do? Cæsar knows already."

He arose and led the way into the trees, Caswallon following the Roman, who strode at ease, not minding that a king should walk behind him. His armor clanked and his footfall on the frozen earth was even heavier than Tros's, but Caswallon, clothed in dyed, embroidered leather moved as silently as a shadow except that his leather-stockinged feet rustled among dry leaves. Tros rolled in his gait as if a heaving deck were under him.

The path they followed led to a new-made picket fence a man's height from the ground, interwoven with willow-withes through which the firelight shone. There was a wide gateway barricaded with oak beams and deeply scored with wheel-ruts, with a log and mud guardhouse beside it, in the door of which stood Conops, who doffed his red cap civilly and let the bars down, but showed one yellow eye-tooth at the Roman.

"I have seen you before," said Marius, acknowledging what he chose to consider a salute.

Conops touched the lid over his sightless eye.

"Ah!" said Marius. "I remember. You forgot your manners. Cæsar punished you. Well, if you have learned the lesson you will be a greater comfort to your master and less dangerous to yourself."

He passed on because Tros beckoned, and Caswallon crowded at his heels. Conops raised the bars again, his tooth still showing through the slit in his upper lip. Before them a low, thatched building, lighted from within, loomed shadowy in the bonfire light, and beyond that the roofs of other, longer buildings set in rows, noisy with voices and song. In the gloom to the right by the gurgling river's edge arose the ribs of three ships, two of them of good size, one tremendous, looking like the black bones of a deep-sea monster beached and picked clean by the birds. The scaffolding erected around all three resembled giant rushes, through which the wind moaned lonesomely.

Tros led the way toward the nearest house, and the door opened before they reached it, Helma, golden-haired and smiling, standing framed in the glow from the hearth.

"My wife," said Tros, and introduced the Roman, who bowed, inspecting her curiously. She answered stare for stare, having heard no good word of the Romans, from Tros at any rate. Her blue eyes challenged his indignantly, until Caswallon laughed, bending his head to get through the door, which was high enough for Tros or any ordinary man.

"She is Norse," he warned. "The Norse are fighters, and the women are the mothers of the men. Look out for her!"

A British slave-girl knelt beside the hearth, turning and basting a huge spitted roast. There was a smell of well-done meat and warming mead that made the Roman smack his lips and set Caswallon whistling, but Tros led the way through a door at the far end, shouting for light, which the slave-girl brought. He lighted three lanterns from the first one, and then kicked the door shut behind Caswallon, who stood looking bored as if he had seen this sight too many times. But the Roman's dark eyes stared appraisingly.

The room was a museum of new wonders. On a table twice a man's length, in the midst, was the model of a ship such as no Roman nor any other living man had seen. She had three masts, three banks of oars and lines so lovely that even the Roman gasped at them. The sails were purple, as were the oar-blades; the top-sides were vermilion; the bottom gleamed like polished silver. She was nearly the same shape end for end, except for a flare from bow to waterline. She was all decked over, and along each side of her were painted shields, each bearing a golden dragon on a purple ground. Near where the break came at the bow and poop were four sets of double uprights, each with a wheel at the top between them. They resembled cranes, but their purpose was explained by models set against the end wall of the room.

"Catapults!" said the Roman, his eyes ablaze with interest. He was an expert in artillery.

"Aye, but better than any Cæsar has!"

Tros was prouder of that model than a mother of her child. It represented ten years' thinking, all his hopes, and three months' whittling with a knife. The Roman wanted to examine the working model of the catapult, but Tros prevented him.

"Nor shall you see inside this," he remarked, and rolled a leaden ball across the floor. But the ball sounded hollow, and the Roman noticed it.

"Neither heavy nor hard enough," he said with an air of long experience and began examining the ship again. Tros considered he had seen enough, took his elbow and led toward the door.

"They tell me Cæsar likes scent," he said, as if revealing confidences. "That lead ball shall hold a nosegay to remind him of the Roman housewives dumping ordure from the house-tops at election time. I am told he has had experience of that."

He led the way into the outer room, Caswallon following, and the Roman faced him when he shut the door.

"Cæsar is a man of full experience," he said. "There is nothing new that you can show him, Tros. He has eaten crusts, and he has worn the purple. Rome spewed him forth. Rome fears him. Rome shall worship him."

"I have heard that Cato, who is a very noble Roman, speaks of him as 'that woman'!" said Tros.

"Aye, and Cato will live to rue it!"

Marius, resenting Tros's grin, strode along the room to where Helma had set three chairs together at an angle near the fire. He sat in one of them, then rose and bowed to Caswallon to be seated first. Caswallon laughed, accepting mead from Helma in a silver tankard that had once been Cæsar's, with his left arm elbowing the Roman back into the chair.

"Wisdom to Cæsar!" he said, drinking deep. "If he knew what trouble kinging it can be, he might let well enough alone. Gods give him, what was that word, Tros? Gods give him *nous,* whatever that means."

"Virtue," said the Roman. "Cæsar has ten men's share!"

Tros passed mead to Marius, but did not drink with him. The three sat down, the firelight in their faces, and there was a long pause while they watched the sizzling meat, and sniffed and eyed each other sidewise, Helma laying platters on the table, studying the Roman all the while as if her blue eyes could burn holes in him. Caswallon was the first to speak again, setting his tankard bottom upward on the floor by way of hint to Helma:

"Now, Tros, out with it. This Roman comes with a message of peace from Cæsar. He says Cæsar prefers to be friendly."

"Let him leave you alone then," Tros retorted. "Was he friendly to the Gauls? To the Belgæ? To the Germans? *He* said so, but did they? Was he friendly when he landed on the Kentish coast and slew half-a-thousand Britons? Bid him prove you his friendship by coming no nearer than Gaul!"

Caswallon nodded, stroking his long moustache. "But he says the

Romans want to trade with us. My men are eager for trade. They call me a snail of a king, with a shell that I crawl into when anything new wants to happen. This man Marius has been quite frank. He says Cæsar's hands are full enough already, so that he doesn't want another war but does want popularity in Rome. He says that if Cæsar can open up trade with us Britons, that will improve his political chances because the rulers of Rome think of nothing but money."

"Whereas you Britons think of nothing but horses and hunting," Tros answered. "You are far too hospitable, and you think other people are like you. You fight the Northmen one day and make friends with them the next, and that may work with Northmen, but it won't work, I tell you, with Romans. Trade? Aye, if plundering is trading! Rome gives nothing, and takes all. She plants her eagles, and around them a colony of soldiers from some other conquered land, who take for themselves what they think they need and send the rest to Rome. Trade? Tribute! I tell you, Rome is a monster that is eating up the world—vicious, stupid, proud, cruel. She has but one virtue."

"Name it," said Caswallon.

Tros eyed the Roman, studying him a full minute before he spoke.

"She can breed and train men like this one. This centurion and his fellows are all the virtue and all the strength that Rome has. They are true to Rome. They lie for her and die for her. They believe in Rome. They are Rome! The rest is money-lenders and a rabble. If you, or any of your men believed in Britain and were as loyal to her as this centurion is to the seething cesspool that he is helping to poison the earth, you would be a power instead of all at odds and at the mercy of the first invader."

The Roman and Caswallon grinned, each at the other and at Tros. They were both men who enjoyed plain speaking.

"You are using this man's argument," Caswallon said, swallowing mead again. "Marius says that Cæsar will undertake to guarantee my kingdom, and to make all the other tribes submit to me."

"In return for what?" Tros asked.

"In return for a few trading posts, my friendship and permission for a Roman official to reside in Britain."

"Alone?"

"No," said Marius. "Roman officials abroad have to have a body-guard of Romans to support their dignity."

Tros laughed aloud, with scorn that made the Roman glance at him.

"Caswallon, that is Rome's way. First a messenger, like this one, honest as the day is long, believing every word he says. Then an envoy. Then a resident official and his body-guard, which grows. Then a little irritation, woman trouble maybe, and a few stones thrown into the residency. Rome protects her man. More troops. Resentment. Riots. War. A puppet king imposed in place of the offending one. Tribute. Rebellion. Drastic punishment. A colony of time-expired foreign soldiers and a Roman governor. Peace, if you call it peace to be obedient and pay the taxes that support the Roman mob! As I sit here and lie not, I have warned you."

"Tros, you are a fool," said Marius without heat. "You will defy Rome when you might reap her rewards. Your reward would be greater than mine, and at less price. I am a Roman born. I have fought her wars and trod her dusty roads all ways across the world and back again. I have sweated, bled and starved for her. And I am fifty years old. All I am is a centurion. How old are you? Not half my age. How much have you starved and bled and sweated? Yet you can become a Roman and command a fleet by simply giving your allegience to Cæsar!"

"I admire Cæsar. I despise him. I fear him because of his power, which I am too fearless to submit to. I loathe him, and I believe he is the ablest man who ever called himself a Roman. Do you understand me?" Tros asked.

"No," said Marius.

"Then you will never understand me," Tros retorted. "Let us be friends until to-morrow. Let us eat together."

"Not yet," said Marius. "My message first. I am a Roman."

He set down the helmet he had been holding between his knees, loosened his sword-belt and undid the buckle at his throat.

"I love Cæsar," he said, almost grimly. "Yet I do not expect too much of him. It is what I can do for Cæsar that is important, not what he can do for me. If I can bring you over to him and persuade Caswallon, my reward will be that I have well served Cæsar."

Tros grinned and nudged Caswallon. "Did I not say Rome can breed centurions?"

"Cæsar," Marius went on, "is no mean man, whatever else you may think of him. He can forgive his enemies. You seized his bireme and his treasure."

"Aye," Tros interrupted, "and I pick the bireme's bones to build a finer ship. I use the treasure to pay the builders."

"Cæsar knows that," said the Roman. "You are not the first man who made plans against him. Two-thirds of his army are men who were in arms against Cæsar not long ago. Those who fought against him hardest, he admires most, and it is they who are the most loyal. Tros, you have done Cæsar more damage than all the Britons did when they opposed him on the beach. You can be his best friend. Why not?"

"Because I do not wish to be," Tros answered. "I am a free man."

"I, too," said Marius. "I am a Roman citizen."

"That is no honor in my eyes," Tros retorted, "for I know Rome. She is a thief that camps on seven hills, selling what she calls her peace to the highest bidder. The mob that is her master sells its votes. Her senators buy prætorships and consulates. She swarms with all the riff-raff of the earth. Her statesmen are all money-lenders and her judges merchants, auctioning privilege in the name of justice. She has no beauty of her own, no art but what was filched from Greece, no honor. Only pride and greed."

"Cæsar will change all that," said Marius. "He needs brave men, of such ability as yours, Tros, to support him when the day comes that he strikes. For he will purge Rome when he has made Gaul safe. Now you are Caswallon's friend, and he is under the thumb of his wife, Fflur. You tell him honestly whether you think he can resist Cæsar if Cæsar should declare war on him in the name of the Senate and the Roman People."

"I have told him," Tros answered, watching Caswallon's face.

But Caswallon was watching the meat on the spit.

"I agree with Fflur," said Tros. "I have offered to help him resist Cæsar."

Caswallon came suddenly out of his reverie and slapped his thigh so hard that Helma jumped and the slave-girl smashed a dish.

"Lud's blood!" He looked hard at the Roman. "You invite me to become the ward of Cæsar. Let us put it this way. I invite you, Marius, to become my henchman! I am a king. Cæsar is no king."

"He will be," said Marius darkly. "Kings kiss his hand."

"I am a king who neither does nor will do that," Caswallon answered. "Will you be my subject?"

"No," said Marius.

"Nor I Cæsar's, nor Rome's! You say you love Cæsar. I have no respect for him. He sends you to speak me fair, but behind your back he sends a swarm of spies who lie to my men, set my counselors against me, bribe brother kings to accuse me and, Tros says, some Romans call Cæsar a woman. Is that true?"

"He is the greatest man who ever lived," said Marius. "He is a greater than Alexander of Macedon."

"I never heard of Alexander. Where is Macedon? No matter," said Caswallon. "This is my answer to Cæsar. Let him fight me for my realm. Me, hand-to-hand. There is an island about midway between my shore and his. I will meet him there, if he is man enough, and we will have it out with swords or any other weapon that he pleases. That is the way we Britons settle arguments. Now let us eat."

He got up and strode to the table, sitting there and rapping on it with his dagger-hilt to make the slave-girl hurry. Marius shrugged his shoulders, unbuckled his bronze armor, laid it in a corner and sat at the table beside Tros, looking ill at ease on the unbacked bench. The Romans liked to sprawl at meal time.

"I will not take that answer," he said calmly. "We Romans are not so easily put off with words. Not that Cæsar could not defeat you easily with any weapon," he added, breaking bread and dipping it in the gravy Helma set before him.

He refused the meat, and hardly tried to conceal disgust at the enormous slices that Caswallon ate.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE GIST OF SKELL'S ARGUMENT

The Eternal Law is simple. Which of you has seen a she-wolf bring forth doves and suckle them? Who saw a bear beget colts, or an ill wind cherish the young buds? Nevertheless, ye look for wisdom from hirelings' lips that are wet with the spittle of greed. But of him who bendeth the bow of his will, and who layeth the arrow of resolution against the string of purpose, ye ask treason against his High Ideal.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

CASWALLON took the Roman away when the meal was finished, to be entertained in the great house on Lud's Hill, Lunden Town, a few miles distant. The Britons were nothing if not hospitable; friend or enemy, it was all one while the feasting lasted. They galloped away in Caswallon's chariot in a whirl of snow, the Roman draped in a horse-blanket and Caswallon making the woods ring with shouts to the plunging team.

Tros watched the bars set back in place, gave orders for the night to Conops and strode away alone to where great bonfires burned in front of a vastly longer building than the one he occupied. Helma watched him through the door and followed, half-smothered in a blanket of British wool. But Tros did not know that. The fires sizzled as the snowflakes damped them and the wind blew in biting gusts, howling under eaves and through the picket fence. It was British weather—raw, dark, melancholy.

"Not fit for a dog," Tros muttered, glad for that once he was not at sea, flailing his arms across his breast to warm himself.

"Skell!" he shouted. "Skell! Where in Hades are you?"

The door of the long building opened, and Skell stood in the opening with the warm light behind him, dressed in British trousers with a long leather smock to his knees. But he did not look like a Briton, any more than Tros did.

"No lies now," Tros greeted him. "Your beard's dry. You've skulked indoors all evening."

Skell came forward, leaving the door open, pulling a leather hood over his head. Within there was a babel of men's voices. Some one roared to him in Norse to shut the door, and a moment later it slammed like a thunderclap, leaving Tros and Skell in darkness.

"What sense watching on a night like this?" Skell asked. "Who would venture out?"

"Am I out or in?" Tros growled. "Didn't I tell you to patrol the yard?"

Skell kept silence, shrugging himself against the bitter wind, facing the same way that Tros did, toward where the scaffolding rose gaunt against the close horizon. Neither of them saw the door open again softly, nor heard it close, because the wind howled.

"Here I have nearly ten score war prisoners, surrendered rebels and prison scrapings. Because you are a natural born snooper, I set you to watch them. Do you know what obedience means?"

Skell laughed. It was a mean snicker, like a jackal's.

"No more than I, will they desert or play tricks," he said, stamping his feet to keep warm. "They're well enough treated and know when they're well off. Do they want to return to the prison? Do they want to be outlawed and hunted like wolves? Who would feed them, if you don't? Go and count them. They're all there."

"Have I ever threatened you?" Tros asked him.

"Not since Caswallon turned me over to you. No need, Tros. I'm grateful. Caswallon would have killed me if it hadn't been for you. I'll serve you faithfully. I'm sorry I went in out of the snow. I'll—"

"Listen! Look!" said Tros and shook a fist like a club under his nose. "I can't watch all the time, and you, you dog, have nothing else to do! Next time I catch you skulking or neglecting to obey my orders I will take you by the neck and beat your brains out against the nearest baulk of timber! Do you believe me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Tros. I'll—"

"Get your bearskin. Patrol until midnight. Bring me word at once of anything that happens."

Skell slunk off looking licked, and Tros watched him until his back was lost like a shadow in the gloom beyond the bonfire light.

"Zeus guide and govern me!" he muttered. "I will have to kill a man before long unless I can find some better way. That Skell has been up to mischief. Nobody trusts him. Nobody likes him. What then was he doing in the Northmen's hut?"

He opened the door and strode into the long, low building. There was instant silence as he slammed the door shut behind him. Two long rows of Northmen, seated on benches at a rough board table, turned their heads to stare. Beside the blazing hearth sat Helma, still hooded in the blanket, warming her feet at the fire.

"Sigurdsen," said Tros. The giant rose from the table-end and strode to meet him, pulling down the leather sleeves over his bare arms. The others sprawled over the table nearly naked to the waist and went on talking. They had a section of a ship drawn on the table in charcoal, and were studying it in the fitful firelight and with the aid of a great ship's lantern that hung overhead.

Tros led Sigurdsen toward the fire and sat down on a stool facing Helma, but he took no notice of her and she did not speak. Sigurdsen sat on a hewn log with his back against the wall, arms folded. He looked vaguely quarrelsome, alert for an excuse to start an argument, and rather sullen meanwhile.

"What was Skell saying?" Tros asked him.

Sigurdsen scratched at the back of his head, as he always did before trying to speak Gaulish, all the speech they had in common. He had been trying to learn it ever since Tros took him prisoner, but he was slower than most Northmen at the trick of thinking in an alien tongue.

"Never mind what Skell said," Helma interrupted, throwing off the blanket. "I am your wife. Listen to me."

As his wife, no man could deprive her of her right to speak her mind. He made a wry face, smiled at himself and submitted.

"Lord Tros," she said, "who is that Roman?"

"Cæsar's man."

"He bids for your friendship?"

Tros nodded.

"You heard us," he answered. "You heard my speech, you heard Caswallon's message that he sent to Cæsar."

"Aye, and I heard the Roman refuse to take the message," she retorted. "Now these fools"—she glared at her brother Sigurdsen and at the forty men who pawed the charcoal marks on the table-top—"talk of forcing you to join Cæsar's fleet."

Tros stood up suddenly, legs apart, his eyes on Sigurdsen. The Northman shook Helma's shoulder, growling angry streams of words that meant nothing to Tros, but he was aware that the other Northmen listened to them and were much too ostentatiously not listening. They pored over the drawing on the table like a lot of scullions sorting dry peas.

"Sigurdsen says"—Helma watched Tros's face as if all destiny depended on his mood, as in fact it did as far as she and her countrymen were concerned—"we are homeless, you and all of us. He says you are the chief, having conquered him, but now we are one great family. What profits one, must profit all, and a danger to one, is a danger to all. We build a great ship, and you are to command her. But he asks, how shall we keep the sea in that great ship, if the Romans close all ports against us and if the Roman fleets pursue us like hounds after a hare?"

"So that is the gist of Skell's argument!" said Tros, his arms akimbo. "No Northman ever heard of Romans until Skell came in out of the wet!" It would have gone hard with Skell if he had chanced into the room that minute. But Helma was not afraid.

"Lord Tros, that is not true," she retorted. "We are Vikings. Our ships sailed to Utica six generations back. There is a stone by my father's hearth in Viborg that came from Carthage. We know who Romans are. I fear and hate them because you do, and I know you are right to hate them for what Cæsar did to your father and to you and to all the crew of that ship you sailed from Samothrace. But Sigurdsen says—"

"You mean Skell says!" Tros broke in scornfully.

"Sigurdsen says, we build a great ship. And how shall we trade? How shall we earn a profit or have food, unless the Romans are our friends? Sigurdsen says these Britons are no friends to count on, and they have no trade-goods fit to load into a ship. Moreover, he says Glendwyr and those other British rebels that Caswallon handed over to you to man the oar-benches are useless. They can neither use the adze nor are they sailors. They will all be seasick, and they can never be trusted in a British harbor, but will run away and leave you."

Tros showed his teeth. That kind of talk exasperated him beyond the power of speech, as Helma well knew. She was beginning to know Tros, woman fashion, from the inside. She continued:

"Sigurdsen says it is the Norse custom, that when one builds a ship he shall command her while she is at sea. While out of sight of the home port his word is law. But before the ship is launched, before they set sail, there are many conferences between him and the friends who have helped him build the ship, who are to sail with him and obey him. They agree as to the destination and the cargo and many other things."

Tros swore under his breath. He had given Sigurdsen his freedom and had no right to treat him as a slave, nor even as a prisoner of war. Besides, Sigurdsen knew ships and how to build them. Without his skilful aid there would be no hope of finishing the great trireme whose frame stood half-completed on the ways.

"Sigurdsen says it is time to speak of all these things," said Helma. "He says this Roman comes offering a good prospect under Cæsar and good money. He advises you to take it. He says, 'Why build a ship unless we are to use her like wise men?' "

The Northmen at the far side of the table were standing now, those on the near side sitting with their backs to it, all of them openly, eagerly listening and ready to take part in the discussion at the first hint of encouragement.

"Lud's blood!" Tros thundered, using the Britons' favorite oath. Even in a tantrum he was careful how he took in vain the names of his own familiar deities. "I have fought you once. Must I split your head again?"

Sigurdsen sprang to his feet. Tros strode toward him, feeling for his sword; but it wasn't there. He had forgotten that he left it at his own fireside. But Sigurdsen, too, was unarmed. The other Northmen began calling to him to protect himself, while Helma stood back against the wall, pale-faced, her eyes wide with terror, yet determined. It was she who had brought the issue to a head. If Tros should have the worst of it Caswallon might avenge him, but her standing among the Northmen would be gone forever. They would call her a weakling's wife. And if Tros were killed—

"Ashore or afloat I am captain. Cry out when you believe it!" Tros shouted.

He struck at Sigurdsen with his fist in the way they used the coestus at the Olympic games, a great sledge-hammer blow that beat down the Northman's guard and sent him staggering. Sigurdsen bellowed from surprise, not pain. He had not thought Tros would try the issue so swiftly as all that. But Tros knew he had to assert and prove supremacy that instant or forevermore yield to the opinions of his men. He was an autocrat, must be one. Autocrats must fight or become mere figureheads.

He struck at Sigurdsen again amid a roar of voices from the forty at the table. Sigurdsen, swinging his fist like an ax, sprang in and rained blows at his head, his own body jerking and his breath in gasps as Tros pounded his ribs and stomach. They used fists for lack of room, Tros not daring to give ground and Sigurdsen, his back toward the wall, unable. Tros had to be swift to settle the business then and there before the other Northmen rallied to their man's aid. It had to be a downright victory, no half-won fight. He feinted, then clubbed with his fist at the Northman's ear, sending him staggering sidewise away from the wall.

There was room then for the game Tros understood. He closed, and now the Northmen did not try to interfere; their own man was a champion who could wrestle two of them at once. They yelled, roared, upset table and benches, but kept a ring clear, crowding Helma to the outside where she could not see, until she seized a firebrand and beat her way back between them to the midst.

Now was a trial of chieftainship that Northmen could appreciate. They valued cunning, but they worshiped muscle and the will to win. They had never felt that when Tros had conquered Sigurdsen in fight, sword against ax, the two had been fairly matched, because on that day Sigurdsen was weary from a battle with the Britons. The sword was longer than the ax. The deck on which they fought was slippery. There were a hundred other reasons. First of them that Sigurdsen was a bigger man than Tros, had been their chief and looked the stronger.

They kept the ring, at first, because it looked as if Sigurdsen must win by sheer strength, weight, reach and fury. Then, presently, Helma beat at their faces with the firebrand. Fury availed nothing against Tros's sudden shifts and desperate determination. Nine times in succession he threw the Northman crashing to the stamped earth floor, until all the breath was gone from him, his bellowing ceased and he was jarred into a state of almost helplessness.

Then, the ninth time, when Sigurdsen lay and looked at him as if walls and roof were spinning before his eyes, Tros seized him by neck and leg before he could recover and hurled him into the embers on the hearth. And that was a stroke of genius.

He rolled clear, and a Northman dowsed him with a water-bucket, but the other Northmen laughed, howled derision at him, mocked him for a fallen chief. And that gave Tros, breathless and exhausted, the one opening he would have asked for if the gods had offered him his choice that minute of all the miracles they had in store.

"You laugh?" he gasped at them. They ceased to laugh. "You dogs! You dare to laugh at my lieutenant? I will show you who laughs last!"

He turned to the hearth, deliberately chose a length of burning oak, rejecting one piece, then another, until he had a club that balanced neatly. He took time to breathe deep, giving Sigurdsen time to recover. He judged he knew Sigurdsen. With the corner of his eye he could see Helma, on her knees by the fallen giant. She was whispering to him. He gave them time to gather into one mob and get in one another's way.

"Dogs! Laugh, will you, at my man Sigurdsen!"

He charged suddenly, beating with the firebrand at their bearded faces, those in front retreating backward against the men behind until they were all crowded against the farther wall and there was nothing for it but to defend themselves or cry submission. Then half-a-dozen sprang at him. But that gave Sigurdsen his chance. Sigurdsen stood to lose all if Tros were conquered by any but himself. Helma had made that much clear to his dazed brain.

So Sigurdsen took another firebrand and came roaring to Tros's aid, beating his own blood relations right and left, helping Tros to scatter them and thrash them thoroughly in detail, Helma screaming to them all the while to get down on their knees and cry submission. There were a dozen of them down, unconscious from blows on the head, when the riot began outside. The din within was nothing.

The wooden walls thundered like a drum as men in the outer dark threw clods and sticks against them from three sides. Some one pounded on the door, which made Tros laugh, because the door was not locked. Mingled with the shrieking of the wind under the eaves there was a tumult of men's voices.

"Hold!"

Tros threw his hand up. The gods, it seemed the very universe was on his side that night! The Northmen rallied to him instead of to one another, rallied against a common danger.

"Sticks!" he commanded, and they ran to rake the faggots over, crying to him he should have let them keep their weapons where they ate and slept. Whereat he laughed again.

"Helma!" he commanded. She stood beside him.

"Go to that door and open it. Have speech with them."

No doubt who they were. Glendwyr, the British rebels and the sentenced prisoners whom Caswallon had spared and given to him to labor in the shipyard and man oar-benches afterwards, were outside clamoring, eager to take the winning side, whichever that might be. If they had had weapons—

Tros motioned to Sigurdsen and half-a-dozen Northmen to stand between him and the door. He did not want it known too soon which side had won the argument. Helma opened the door, shielding her face against the blast of icy wind. But the man who entered first was Conops, ducking low and running. He blinked at the light, caught sight of Tros behind the Northmen, ran to him breathless and said hoarsely:

"Quick, master, before they burn the ship!"

"Have they started to burn it?"

"No, master. It snows and—"

"Find Skell and bring him here alive to me!" Tros answered.

Conops vanished, ducking out again into the storm. Then Glendwyr stood in the doorway, peering past Helma, with the wild look in his eyes that reckless men of breeding have who foresee opportunity to rewin freedom. He looked ragged in his sheepskins. He was like a wild man.

"Have you killed him?" he asked, for he had seen Conops run, and he interpreted that to mean what he hoped it did. "Northmen! Join me! I will lead you to the woods and freedom! We will seize a town and—"

Tros stepped forward. The sight of him froze the word on the youngster's lips; he turned to shout to the men behind him, but not soon enough. Tros charged, with Sigurdsen and all the Northmen at his back, sweeping Helma to one side. They poured through the door as if the place were on fire behind them, striking right and left at shadowy Britons, who broke and ran, screened almost instantly from vision by the driving snow. Young Glendwyr struggled in Tros's grasp. Tros had him by the throat and shook him as he rolled and swayed toward the long huts that were the Britons' quarters shook and choked him half unconscious, then dragged him, his heels leaving ruts in the snow.

The snow had put the fires out. There was no light except what came through the open door behind them, where Helma stood framed in the glow. The Northmen were quartering the darkness, calling, pursuing a few Britons who had lagged behind the rest. Sigurdsen raced through the murk to make sure the ship was all right. Then, light ahead and a stream of Britons pouring into the biggest of their own huts.

"Fools!" Tros muttered. "Why didn't they fire the thatch?"

Fire was the one danger that he dreaded.

Glendwyr was senseless. Tros hove him over-shoulder, carried him, head and toes down, like a half-filled sack.

"Northmen!" he roared. "Northmen!"

They began to gather toward him, looming in twos and threes out of the murk. Then Sigurdsen came, floundering and slipping, to report the ship unharmed. The light vanished suddenly.

"Open that door!" Tros commanded.

Sigurdsen and two others kicked the door inward, breaking the leather hinges. Tros hove young Glendwyr in both hands and pitched him through the opening into the midst of his discouraged friends. Then he strode in, Sigurdsen and all the Northmen following.

It was a big room, nearly a hundred feet long, with mud and wattle walls, except in the midst of one long side, where there was a stone hearth and a section of stone wall for the fire to burn against, with a hole in the roof to let the smoke out. There was a big fire, damped by snow that blew in through the hole, and all the space under the thatch was blue with stinging smoke. The floor was a litter of blankets, sheep-skins with the fleece on, wolf-skins, anything that would serve for bedding and, as in the other hut, there was a long, strong table down the midst.

The Britons backed away beyond the table, crowding at the far end of the room, where their faces, framed in the smoke and in their own long hair, scowled and gaped like bodyless phantoms. Some of them had dragged young Glendwyr with them. He was standing now, feeling his throat where Tros's fingers had wrenched it, leaning against two men, gagging and gasping, but recovering his wits.

Tros took a stick from Sigurdsen and rapped the table with it. Silence fell, in which hardly a man breathed.

"Are you all here?" he demanded. "Or are there Britons in the other huts?"

None answered. He sent a Northman to go and look. The Northman came back at the end of a couple of minutes with his scalp bleeding where some one had cracked it open with a stick.

"Sigurdsen, take ten men and bring me those Britons here!"

Sigurdsen went, taking the ten who were nearest to him. Then Helma came bringing Tros's sword, and he buckled it on with the hilt well forward, but did not draw it from the sheath.

"Let the rest of us bring weapons!" said a Northman in his ear, but he brushed the man aside and did not answer. He had the armory key in the pouch under his tunic and proposed to keep it there until this fight was won.

There was nothing more said until Sigurdsen and his ten came driving thirty Britons in a herd in front of them. The new-comers protested noisily that they had had nothing to do with the riot. But Tros demanded which of them had split a Northman's scalp and, receiving no answer, seized the nearest. The man yelled denial, offering to name the culprit, but Tros shook him until his teeth chattered and then flung him toward the far end of the room. He fell on all fours and crawled the remainder of the distance.

"Down to the far end, all of you!"

They backed away, forcing themselves into the crowd. None except young Glendwyr seemed to want to be in that front rank. But he, still holding to two men for support, stood so far in front that the smoke was like a pall between those three and the others. Tros rapped at the table again, but there was no need, there was already silence.

"The next slave who strikes a freeman shall die!" he announced.

There was a long pause while he let that ultimatum sink in.

"Kill me now!" said Glendwyr.

He could hardly speak for the contusion of his throat.

Tros turned to look at Helma. He was curious to see what she might have to say to that request. But Helma was gone again.

"This night I will kill no man," Tros announced. "You are a slave, Glendwyr. You are all slaves. You have no right to live or die without my bidding. These Northmen are freemen. They were my prisoners of war. I set them free. You Britons were rebels against your lawful king; beaten rebels and traitors, given to me in bondage by the king you would have slain. But for me, you would have been burned alive in wicker baskets, six to a basket, tied and roasted slowly, as I am told the custom is with felons."

They could not gainsay that. He was talking in their own language truth that each man knew. They were lucky. Three good meals a day, and not such terribly hard work, although they did not like to work so regularly. Tros had not even supplied the Northmen overseers with whips. And strangely enough they did not mind having Northmen set over them. They had no sense of national hatred, although Northmen were hereditary enemies. Only Glendwyr retorted—

"Lord Tros, I am a chief's son!"

"You were," Tros answered. "You forfeited your heritage by treason. You have it to win again by good faith. I hold no man irretrievably a slave. I set him free when he deserves it. The task is yours to earn freedom. The right of judgment mine."

"How long?" asked Glendwyr.

"Pluto! Is it I who stand at judgment?" Tros retorted. "Know this: I will never set one of you free as long as you rebel against me! I know what happened. Skell came, half a Northman and half Briton—false to both! To the Northmen he said, 'Bid Tros join the Romans,' hoping that would reach Caswallon's ears and make the king my enemy. To you he said, 'Tros has joined the Romans and Caswallon will slit his throat!' Then when you thought my Northmen had slain me, you feared Caswallon would fall heir to you all again and throw you into Lunden jail. So you summoned the Northmen to make common cause with you and take to the woods and be outlaws."

"Skell said you intended to sell us to the Romans for their galleys and receive trained rowers in our place," a man piped up from the smoke-cloud behind Glendwyr.

"And you fools listened to him! Well, that is no way to win freedom. Shall I put you in chains? Would you work better in fetters?"

They murmured there was no need. Only Glendwyr was silent.

"Now young Glendwyr," said Tros, "shall I flog you?"

"No," said Glendwyr.

But he did not say why not or inflect his voice at all persuasively.

Tros stroked his beard.

"I will make no bargain with you, and I will not kill you," he said, speaking slowly. "But if you do not believe I am your master, you would better have your mind changed now, for it will hurt worse later on. Come here."

Glendwyr hesitated, but one of the other Britons pushed him from behind. He came forward slowly beside the long table, leaning his hand on it to support himself, for his legs were still unsteady.

"You are a slave. I may not fight you, even if I would. Why shall I not flog you?" Tros asked.

"There is no need," Glendwyr answered. "I submit. If there were one man here who would stand with me, I would be in the woods now. But they ran, as they ran when I rebelled against Caswallon. I despise them. I submit."

"The man who despises his men always must submit," Tros answered. He turned away from him because there was a new noise outside, seeming to come from beyond the picket fence. A squeaking of wheels in the snow, the stamp and snort of winded horses and a bold voice shouting, but what the words were Tros could not hear. Then there came a crash as part of the picket fence went down before an onslaught of some kind, horses and wheels, a shout again, and a man leaped through the doorway—none less than Caswallon, fur-clad, brandishing a spear.

"How now, Tros?" he asked, laughing as he took in the situation. "Helma sent word by the slave-girl that you were in danger from your men."

"Never once!" Tros answered, but his face was bruised and flushed where Sigurdsen had hit him, and Caswallon laughed again.

Marius, the Roman, strode in, helmet and armor clanking. His was the yard-long military stride that lent dignity to any kind of turmoil. A crowd of Caswallon's young British aristocrats, heavily clothed in furs, surged through the doorway behind him.

"Why didn't you send for help sooner?" Caswallon asked. "I would have come."

"I needed none," Tros answered. "There was a question as to who is captain here. I have answered it."

"Tros," said the Roman quietly, "you should be a Roman. You are a man after our Cæsar's heart."

Then Skell came, frozen blood on his face and his hands tied, kicked along by Conops.

"Nay, master, I didn't knife him. You said 'alive,' so I used only the hilt. I found him coming forth from the Lord Caswallon's house."

"Loose him," Tros commanded, and Conops cut the thong.

"I would crucify that man," said Marius. "He came to have word with me."

"What did he say?" Tros asked.

"That for a price he can persuade your men to force you to join Cæsar. Treasonable talk. It is not our Roman custom to encourage it. It is cold. If you crucify him he will be dead by morning."

Tros looked steadily at the Roman, drawing ten long breaths before he spoke again. Skell did not try to speak.

"No," Tros said at last. "To-night I will kill no man."

"You and your amber eyes. You look like a lion," said the Roman. "Are you afraid to kill?"

Tros stroked his beard. The room grew full of silence, Caswallon leaning on a spear and smiling, standing with his cloak undone and firelight gleaming on the golden buckles of his tunic.

"You are Caswallon's guest. How can I kill you?" Tros answered at last, looking straight into Marius' eyes. "If I should kill Skell, how should I learn what you have said to him? I look like a lion? You and I, Marius, have both seen lions, not only in the circuses of Rome. Skell is a jackal. Are you Cæsar's jackal?"

"I am a centurion," said Marius.

"Helma," Tros answered, speaking very slowly, "is my wife. Skell is my jackal. They are neither of them at your disposition, nor at Cæsar's."

Marius blinked but did not flinch perceptibly, although one or two Britons behind him laughed.

Caswallon fastened up his fur cloak and gave his spear to a retainer, pulling a fur hood over his head.

"Let us go," he said abruptly. "Come, Marius. Tros, you will need to mend your fence. We broke it."

Marius, following Caswallon to the door, came face to face with

Helma. She was bringing Tros's bearskin overcoat. Her young eyes met the Roman's angrily. She almost spat at him. Tros laughed. In the doorway the back of Caswallon's great shoulders shook suggestively. It looked as if his hand might be over his mouth, but he made no sound.

CHAPTER XL

"WHAT SHAPE IS THE EARTH?"

Whatever ye see or hear or know was æons old before ye heard of it. If it is new to your ears and eyes; if ye have never smelt or felt it; if it tastes not like mothers' milk and ye never bought or sold it in the fair, is that why ye think ye are fit to pass judgment and to mock those who open their minds?

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

SOME kind of mental alchemy was brewing in the murk that night. The wind shrieked of it and the shadows seemed to be the womb of tragedy. Tros turned a dozen Britons out into the dark to mend the fence Caswallon's men had broken, Conops spurring them to haste with his knife-hilt and much blasphemy mixed of Greek, Gaulish, Norse and any other language that came to mind.

Skell he kept with him because he wanted Skell alive, and he had small doubt that Britons or Northmen would kill him if he left him hutted up with either. Skell had betrayed Northmen, Britons and Tros alike; he should betray Marius, too, presently. Sigurdsen stayed with Tros uninvited, snorting disgust at the weather that only they really feel who were born amid gales and crave the sunshine. But Sigurdsen's motive needed no explaining; he wished to cement new confidence, having lost that of his own countrymen. His day was done unless Tros should continue to lend him countenance.

The three, Tros leading, Skell in the midst, leaned into the wind and fought their way against it to where the great ship's ribs loomed stark against the night, wind howling through them and through the scaffolding. Once in a while, when a squall from between the buildings on their right hand blew a lane down the driving snow, they could see the great crane like a gallows over all. Then darkness, and they stumbled over sawed logs, planks hidden under snow, ropes, baulks of timber, all the litter of a shipyard, all the evidence of haste by men unused to systematic building.

They stood under the ways, beneath the prow at last, where the scaffolding was boarded up below and formed a shelter against the wind. The snow had filled the chinks, so it was warm there and Skell ceased shivering. Sigurdsen found a lantern and lighted it from one of the fire-pots stowed in a locker. Tros took it from him and walked forward underneath the ship until, two-thirds of her length toward the stern, there began to be hardly standing room under the keel. Then he laughed at something and held the lantern so that Sigurdsen could see what he did.

Shavings and small bits of dry wood had been piled into a heap that reached nearly to the keel. Snow had blown against it before the wind changed and the stuff was damp. Tros kicked away the snow. Shavings and sawdust actually smoked down near the bottom, and he stamped it out, kicking the snow back into the heap and mixing both together.

"While you plotted to rule me!" he said, holding the light close to Sigurdsen's face.

But Sigurdsen had had punishment enough. His face was bruised and his eyes were a beaten man's. Tros turned the light on Skell.

"Who did this?" he demanded.

Skell's red-rimmed eyes grew ghastly in the dark. He licked his lips. He tried to dodge the lantern-light, but Tros kept it close to his face.

"I—I did it!" he said at last.

"One little word there was between you and your death! If you had lied, that was the end of you," Tros answered. "How much did the Roman pay you?"

Again Skell trembled on the verge of lying. But the lantern betrayed every line of his face. Tros peered into his eyes. The thought of death was comfortless down there in the gusty darkness with the cold river sucking among reeds fifty or sixty feet away.

"He promised me freedom."

"And what?"

"And two sestertia."

"If what?"

"If the ship burned."

"Two thousand sesterces to burn a ship? Just to pile a heap of tinder under her? And he a Roman. Hah! What more did he demand for that price?"

"Lord Tros, I dare not say. Ask Marius."

"I remember now, I swore I will not kill a man to-night."

Skell grinned at that. He was half mad with terror; the bloodshot whites of his eyes rolled like a steer's in the shambles.

"But I will nail you by the ears to one of these posts," said Tros, "and when morning comes—"

"Lord Tros, if I tell, will you—"

"Nay, I make no bargains!" Tros retorted. "Dog! Swine of a bastard British-Northman! Look!" He slapped the planking of the great ship overhead. "Ten years I have dreamed of this. I have fought the seas, year in and year out. Storms and worse weather than to-night's. Ships, boats, crews to break a man's heart, all to learn enough to build this beauty. I fought Cæsar for the gold to buy her timbers. I fought pirates and rebels to get men to do the work. I even spared your life, you dog, so hungered I for men to build my heart's desire. And now she is half-built—three months' labor of two hundred men and Sigurdsen—and me, burning oil by night to draw the plans, first on the task at dawn and last to leave it. Dog! You dare to try to burn my ship, and then to bargain with me? Seize him, Sigurdsen! Bring nails! He shall freeze here until morning!"

"Nay, nay!" Skell dropped on his knees, mumming with dry lips, licking them, then slobbering his fox-hued beard. "I will tell! Lord Tros, no cruelty! I did not know how great a man you are! No friends. Freedom, property all gone. What could I do but listen to that Roman? A man must hope! A man must help himself!"

"Even a slave can be a man," Tros answered. "What did Marius demand of you?"

Skell hesitated yet, but Sigurdsen came striding through the dark with cord and two bronze nails.

"Helma!" he said, gulping, almost swallowing the word.

"How?" Tros knew the Roman was not fool enough to think he could seduce Helma or persuade her to betray himself.

"I was to burn the ship. The Britons were to kill you. The Northmen would be free and masterless. Their own longship that you captured is still seaworthy. Marius was to offer them a price to man that and take him back to Gaul, taking Helma with them."

"For Cæsar?"

"So said Marius. Cæsar has never seen a daughter of the Vikings."

"Hey-yey-yey! Rome breeds centurions," said Tros. "That Marius should have been a Greek, not a Roman. But what a loyal dog to Cæsar! What a fetch-and-carry, faithful, crafty scout of an ambassador! Lud's blood and backbone! Skell! If you had half the grit of Marius and half young Glendwyr's spirit, I might fear you. Better for you, perhaps, that you are no more than a jackal!"

He turned away a moment pacing to and fro under the ship's keel, with his hands behind him, kicking at his sword-point as he turned.

"Marius called me a lion," he muttered to himself. "Why does a lion let jackals follow him? Why not kill them?"

But he knew why he did not intend to kill Skell. He was grateful to him. Skell had been useful, bringing disaffection to a head, providing opportunity to nip in the bud what might have grown into a serious sedition. Skell's value was gone for the moment, but men have short memories, whereas a jackal's character persists. He might need Skell again.

"Zeus pity you!" he said, taking the lantern from Sigurdsen and holding it close to Skell's face.

There came a blast of freezing wind that made Skell shrug himself against the oaken post on which the ship's buttock rested.

"I suppose you are here on earth like the rest of us to try to learn to be a man. But how many lives will the learning take you? Miserable bastard! I will not rob you of experience. You may yelp and gnaw bones and jackal it in my wake for a while yet. Until I mark a change in you, be Sigurdsen's fetch-and-carry man. Work him hard, Sigurdsen. Follow."

He led the way, swinging the lantern, and inspected all the lumber piles to make sure there were no more fires laid, kicking away the snowdrifts, making Skell move heavy timbers so that he might peer among the crevices. Then into the drafty sheds, stirring among the shavings and adze splinters.

Then into the locked storehouse, where the finished fittings lay in orderly confusion. Ropes—there seemed enough to make a net to hold the world in—ash oars, stout and long enough to mast a fishing boat; pegs of larchroot of a dozen sizes and by the thousand, for fastening ship's planking; bronze rivets thicker than a man's wrist; working parts, chain and pulleys, for the four great catapults; yew beams and woven horsehair strings for the twelve-flight arrow-engines, arrows by the thousand, iron-barbed, of beech and goose-quill, roped in bundles; paint, pitch, box-wood blocks, bronze anchors of a new design, with wooden stocks at right angles to the flukes—wealth! It represented more than wealth to Tros. It was the expression of his genius. It was the key to independence and the unknown.

Sigurdsen eyed it all miserably, valuing the weight of bronze and reckoning the labor that had cost so much in food, housing, clothing, toil of supervision. Had he owned Cæsar's treasure chest, he would have thought twice, ten times before he risked its contents on a venture on the high seas. To him, a ship was only a protection against famine, a defense against invasion, an expense, a last resource, to be built with skill and patience but reserved until a man must battle with the seas.

He was a sailor because he was a sea-king's son, because he had had to be, because the bitter seas around his northern home had been the only road to anywhere when crops failed and the long, dark winters threatened hunger. Sigurdsen would have bought land and would have built a mansion on it, if he had had Tros's money.

Whereas if Tros had had all Caswallon's wealth and all the money coined in the mint at Verulam, he would have built three ships instead of one. And the one ship that he could build, with the help of the money he had looted along with Cæsar's bireme, was to be the finest that had ever sailed the seas.

He had torn Cæsar's own bireme's planks and beams apart for the bronze in her and to learn how Roman shipwrights built for strength; and he had improved on all their joints, proportions, fastenings. For beauty of design, seaworthiness and speed, he had turned to the Northmen's longship, captured in the Thames, copying her under-water lines, the easy entry and the almost fish-like quality of the stern, that could never be pooped, however fierce a following sea. Above all he had copied her lightness, sacrificing no strength, stiffening the chine to enable his ship to carry an enormous spread of sail, and providing three masts, in which respect again he was a daring innovator.

As for rig, he had copied the lateen spar, loved of the Phœnicians, with tackles of his own invention that should make it easier to tack swiftly. All his cordage and his sail-cloth was of linen. British women were working by the whale-oil lamps that minute, weaving against time to earn the unheard-of prices that he paid. Three sets of sails, and covers in which to stow them!

"Three months' work yet," he grumbled, knowing in his heart that he would work a miracle if the last spike should be driven and the last rope bent before midsummer; but to attain the possible a man must strive for the impossible. He knew Cæsar would be building ships in Gaul all winter long, and he proposed to take to the sea ahead of him.

He knew that Cæsar was meditating a second attempt to invade Britain, although the Britons themselves, Caswallon alone possibly excepted, did not believe it. They were deceived by Cæsar's overtures for peace, and by the spies, for the most part Gauls, who threaded the country in the guise of merchants. The one thing that Tros dreaded more than all else was that Cæsar's attempt might be made in spring, before his own ship was finished, perhaps even before he could get her launched.

If he could get her into the water before Cæsar came, it might be fairly easy to conceal the mastless hull in some creek higher up the Thames, although it would be more than two hundred feet long and not easy to manœuver in the narrower reaches of the river. He did not believe that even a Roman general would be so unwise, so unseamanly, as to risk his fleet a second time on an open beach, where the first storm was sure to destroy it. Cæsar's next invasion, he felt sure, would be up the Thames estuary aimed straight at Lunden Town and Verulam.

So he had made his Northmen and his Britons toil from dawn until dark. He had hired minstrels to sing and play music to them. He had hired hunters to keep them well supplied with venison, boar meat, geese and ducks, which was cheaper, after all, than buying sheep and oxen from the land-owners, who put up the price of everything their foresight told them he might need. He had even hired three fishing boats and sent that fleet to sea in winter to bring cod, sole and herring; there was a stench in the biting wind from the smoke-house near-by, and from the vats of fish-oil that he had rendered down from surplus herrings. Only a man who builds a big ship knows what quantities of oil are needed.

Sheltering the lantern now under his bearskin cloak against the wind, he led toward the forges and the foundry, grinding his teeth as he thought of the trouble he had had with British blacksmiths, masters of their craft, past masters of obstruction and extortion, believing themselves keepers of the metal mystery. There were things that Tros knew about metals that they did not know, as for instance, how to melt a modicum of iron in with the bronze to strengthen it, thus helping to reduce weight. He had had to fight them to a standstill before they would admit him into the foundry shed; he had had to threaten to throw them into the molten mixture before they would consent to change the proportions of tin and copper. And then, that battle won, he had had to watch them lest they put in lead instead of iron to spite him.

But the worst had been the charcoal burners. They, too, were a guild and, like the blacksmiths, they were the descendants of swarthy tribes who lorded it in Britain long before the Trinobantes and Iceni came from some forgotten mainland. Conquered and, in a sense, submerged, they had retained their freedom, scorned by the aristocratic Britons, living in their own forest villages of mud and boughs, refusing even to trade charcoal unless they were more than usually hungry.

Yet Tros had needed and continued to need charcoal of the best, almost as much as he needed heart of oak and metal. He had tried raiding their chickens and pigs to reduce them to reason; had tried overpayment, bonuses for quality, and floggings for broken promises, but had failed until at last he found their hermit-priest, half druid, half sorcerer, and by bribing him with smoked cod's roe and herring oil had ensured deliveries of the best stuff, kilned, of willow, not oak sticks, burned in heaps beneath a cover of wet turf.

Memory of what that had led to, of the cod-roe and fish-oil friendship made with old Eough, the sorcerer, restored Tros to comparative good humor. It was Eough who had shown him the cave beneath Caswallon's stables, into which the dung of generations of horses had been shoveled; Eough who had dug down to the bottom of it where the yellowish crystals lay inches deep; Eough who had shown him how to mix those crystals with powdered sulphur, charcoal, resin and oak sawdust, until he had a fiendish concoction that would burn like the fires of the Jews' Gehenna, with a stench that no human being could endure.

It was Eough who knew where sulphur could be found in quantity, though it was rare and valuable stuff in Britain, and had promised to provide it in return for its weight in salted cod and herring oil. He had the lead balls all ready for the mixture—lacked only the sulphur now—and four prodigious catapults of his own invention that would hurl those balls with accuracy nearly half a mile.

Bouquets for Cæsar! Better than Rome's electioneering ordure poured by women from the roofs! Something that would make an enemy trireme's captain hurry to abandon ship!

Thought of the surprise he had in store for Cæsar started him singing in the teeth of the howling gale. The song was beaten back against his face; his own ears hardly heard it, but Sigurdsen did, behind him, and began a Viking chant that out-clamored the wind and made even Skell walk like a man.

So they passed by the break in the fence that Conops and the Britons had repaired, passed thence to the long huts where the Britons lay on sheepskins on the floor, and Tros surveyed them, brandishing the lantern, making sure there was no more plotting for that night at any rate; thrust Skell into a watchhouse, where he could sleep alone and pity himself to his heart's content; until at last they tramped into the Northmen's quarters, where the table was set in place again and six men slept on it, the others snoring on the benches against the wall.

Tros shook the snow off his bearskin, strode to the fire and kicked the dying embers into a blaze. By the light of that, he turned and looked straight into Sigurdsen's eyes.

"You little know what eats me," he said, speaking slowly because Sigurdsen had hard work to understand Gaulish. "You lost your little kingdom. I never had one. This ship will be my first. I yearn for it as Cæsar yearns to own all earth and sit in judgment with a golden crown on his bald head! I would not give that for a crown," he said, snapping his fingers. "Sigurdsen," he went on, staring harder than ever into the Northman's blue-gray eyes, "what is the shape of the earth?"

"Ask Odin. Ask the gods," said Sigurdsen, drawing his huge bulk back a little. Tros's expression made him half afraid. "There is a rim, over which the sea pours everlastingly, and beyond that there is no air, no light, nothing; but as to what shape it is, who knows?"

"The earth is round!" said Tros. "Round like one of those leaden balls I made to fling at Cæsar!"

"Peace!" Sigurdsen exclaimed. He was scandalized. "A man should not make jests of such a matter."

"Round!" said Tros. "And I will sail around it!"

"Now you are mad!" said Sigurdsen. "I have known men made mad by a blow on the skull."

"How mad was I when I told you we could build a longship with three banks of oars?" Tros answered. "How mad was I when I gave you your liberty? You, raw-beaten, trembling with hate, as ready to kill me as to eat my salt? How mad was I when I told you of the catapults, and of the burning stink? Mad, I suppose, because I will cover the ship with tin if I can get the stuff! How many times have I lied to you since you first knew me? The world is round."

"That is easy to say. But who knows it? How do you know?" Sigurdsen demanded.

There was a half-glare in his eyes. The whites gleamed in the firelight.

"How did I know how to figure the ship's dimensions? It is part of the Mystery teaching. Earth, moon, sun, stars, all of them are round, and the earth revolves around the sun."

"You lie!" said Sigurdsen breathlessly.

"If I lie," Tros said, looking hard at him again, "and if you can prove it, I will give you the ship and all that she contains!"

"Huh! Who can prove it?" Sigurdsen retorted.

"You and I. We will set forth. We will sail around the world. If we should reach that rim you speak of, where the sea goes tumbling over and there is no more air, I will give you the ship and you may sail her home again. I will give you the ship unless I can prove that the world is round by sailing all the way around. We shall see."

"No," said Sigurdsen, "we shall never see."

"How not?"

If Sigurdsen had understood the glow in Tros's amber eyes he would have been less careless how he delivered himself pledged and bound.

"Because," he answered, "the men will mutiny if they learn that we sail on such a madman's quest as that! They will never consent to start."

"Which is why I speak to you and not to them," said Tros. "This is my secret and yours, none other's. If you keep it and if you play me fair, serving faithfully as my lieutenant, and if we two together find that the world is not round, she shall be your ship!"

"She is as good as my ship now!" said Sigurdsen.

"But if you fail me in one particular, if you refuse me one obedience, or if you hang back, or if you seek to turn homeward before we see that rim of the world that you say is there, or if we prove that the world is round by sailing all around it, then she is still my ship and you are still my man," said Tros. "Shake hands on it."

Whereat, having bound Sigurdsen by oath and by cupidity, so that he had no more doubt of him at all, Tros left him staring at the embers and returned to where Helma sat before the fire stirring warm mead against his coming.

CHAPTER XLI

"THE WORLD IS ROUND!"

Ye accuse me of keeping secret knowledge that I should share among you, as if a she-bear should show you her cubs or a thrush should tell you where her eggs are nested. There is nothing, nay, no knowledge hidden saving only from him who seeketh the wherewithal to fatten ignorance.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

HELMA sponged the blood out of Tros's hair, where Sigurdsen's fists had rained blows on him, and sat down to her knitting. There was no light but the blazing hearth, and from that the howling wind blew intermittent gusts of smoke into the room, but it was no darker or draftier than her former home beside the Baltic had been, and she was proud of Tros, which bred contentment.

She had settled down to wifehood better than he had to the husband's part. He was a disturbing man to live with, approving all the outer forms of luxury, evidenced by painted walls, dyed hangings, goose-breast feather bed and the best of everything to eat and drink, but bursting in to swallow a meal in haste and charging out again to stride among the ship-builders and watch each peg and rivet driven home. When the bronze was to be poured he stayed out all night long.

"You love that ship much better than you love me," she had said a dozen times.

He usually laughed and answered that he did not doubt it.

"Shall you change a man in three months?" he would ask her. "That ship is of my own imagining. I dreamed her. Lo, I build her. You came from the gods. I never sought you. I accepted you, because it seemed to me the gods intended that, and you are a good woman, brave and beautiful."

Whereafter, in the rare quiet moments that they had together, he would lapse into a brown study, staring at the fire, brows knitted, studying some problem of construction or contriving new ingenious ways of saving time.

But to-night he was in a new mood, at any rate in her experience. He looked at her instead of at the fire. It seemed almost for the first time to occur to him that her hair was like spun gold, her eyes the color of lake water in the spring, her figure, neck, hands, feet, like those of a Diana that adorned a fane in Ephesus. He even remarked on it.

"No wonder Marius bribed Skell!"

She looked up sharply from her knitting.

"He tried to bribe me." She nodded, watching Tros's eyes.

"Which? Skell or Marius?"

"Marius."

Tros whistled three or four bars of a song that had its vogue along the Alexandrian waterfront, a song about the Ptolemies and women. But Helma did not know it was impolite, she rather liked the air, and she never could help smiling when Tros whistled. He did it through the gap between his square front teeth, and it made all the muscles of his face move comically.

"He sent his slave," said Helma, "that Greek Bagoas who shaves him and makes his bed. That was yesterday."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you are you, and I do not wish to change you, but myself, so that I may resemble you and we may understand each other. You are still, and you watch when an enemy begins to uncover his plan, until the time comes to surprise the enemy. And then you smite. So I was still. I saw that you knew part of what was going on, and I did not wish to confuse you. But I made my brother, Sigurdsen, betray what was in his mind, and so brought that part to a head. None questions now who is captain. Now since that is settled, I will tell you about Marius."

Tros stroked his beard. He began to study his young wife all over again from the beginning. Brave he had known her to be, and beautiful, and not at all given to contradicting him, which was more convenient for her than possibly she guessed! But this was a new phase of her.

"Speak in your own good time," he said.

And that was not the way that most men treated women. One demanded to know every detail of their conversation with any other man, pretending as a rule to disbelieve every word of it, or else one ran away because they talked too much.

"Marius sent Bagoas," Helma went on, "and Bagoas promised that if I will persuade you to join Cæsar and become a Roman citizen, Cæsar will see to it that I visit Rome under his protection. He said, I will become a great lady in Rome, because all Rome will admire my fair hair and my complexion."

"And you said?"

"I answered, I do not negotiate with slaves. I said, let Cæsar speak to the Lord Tros in person."

"Good!" Tros clapped his thigh, then laid his head against the chair-back, laughing silently. "This is a fine cycle of intrigue!" he said after a minute or two. "First, Marius invites me to become a Roman and receive the command of Cæsar's fleet, undoubtedly, although he did not say so, in order that I may lead the fleet up the Thames and rape the stronghold of my friend Caswallon.

"Next, through Skell's agency, Marius persuades my Northmen to try to compel me to become a Roman. Yet at the same time, and through the same Skell's agency, he tried to persuade my Britons to rebel against me on the very ground that I propose to sell them to the Romans. In the self-same hour he bribes Skell to burn my ship, and to take you and my Northmen to Cæsar, leaving me dead, murdered by my Britons. Later, all plans having miscarried, he proposes to have Skell crucified in a storm, so that he may freeze to death before he can reveal the plot. What do you make of it all?"

He sat back again, watching Helma's face across the zone of firelight. She counted stitches on her knitting needle before she answered.

"I make of it that Cæsar knows you are a man of valor, a stout friend or a bold enemy," she said at last. "He will either have you on his side or else destroy you. From what you have told me of Cæsar, I think he would keep faith with you if you should yield to him. And I think, that if you refuse to yield to him he will never rest until he has found some way of killing you."

Tros nodded

"And what do you advise?" he asked.

"Be yourself, Lord Tros. It seems to me you have no ambition such as Cæsar's, and if you should yield to him you would have to be another Marius. Cæsar would use your valor and strength and cunning. He would reward you. You would grow richer than ever Marius will. But Cæsar would become your god and you his servant, furthering his aim. You have told me his aim is to bring the whole world under the Roman yoke, he ruling Rome. I am sure that you could help him better than any lieutenant he has yet had. But I would rather drown with you in freedom than wear gold and pearls on the steps of Cæsar's throne. Nevertheless, I will do as you say."

Tros nodded, reappraising her. In the few months since she fell captive to his sword he had had no time to probe into her inner consciousness and learn of what stuff she was made. But it seemed she had studied him, and she astonished him.

"Speaking of the world," he said, "what shape is it?"

She looked up from her knitting suddenly, surprised, her blue eyes meeting his, first, as if she suspected him of trying to make fun of her, then, aware that he was in earnest.

"I would like to know," she answered.

"Zeus!"

He grinned as if she had given him new ship's stores or a new idea for building against time. He looked as pleased with her as if she were a coil of seven-ply linen rope, or a bolt of linen sail-cloth, or a ton of well-kilned willow charcoal.

"You shall know! Helma, you shall see!"

She laid the knitting on her lap and watched him, awaiting more speech, never questioning him when he was in that mood, never interrupting thought when it glowed behind his amber eyes. But at last she understood that he was studying her, not thinking of the world's shape.

"If I may see what you see," she said.

But he brushed that aside with a gesture as mere harping on the obvious. Of course she should see. She was his wife. She should sail the high seas with him.

"I wonder I never thought of that before," he exclaimed, looking at her so hard, so appraisingly that she looked down at her hands and at her dyed woolen dress to see what the matter might be.

"Were you thinking of leaving me behind?" she asked.

But he brushed that aside, too, as not worthy of discussion.

"Nay! But I had not thought how you shall go before me! Helma, one thing I have mulled over in vain until this minute, how shall the ship's bow be finished! A serpent there shall be, since that betokens wisdom. I have the serpent made, of coiling larchroot more than a man's thigh thick and the head carved from a great lump of yew, mouth open, all set with whale's teeth found on the seashore. It lies in the storehouse now, awaiting nothing but the paint and gold leaf. There is a great forked tongue of bronze, fixed on a hinge, so it will flicker like a moving serpent's when the ship moves."

"Wonderful," said Helma, disappointed.

"Aye! It will make the Romans pray! But I have thought of a greater thing. Below where the serpent is to oversee the course, between the ship's bow and the waterline, a place lacks ornament. I had thought of adding three coils to the serpent, so that it might appear to rise out of the sea from under the ship's keel, but it is better to give it two tails coiling on either side the full length of the sheer strakes, joining into one tail at the stern. And now I know what I will do with the ship's stem beneath the serpent's neck. I will set your image there, blue eyes and golden hair and all! Cuchulain the Briton shall carve it out of heart of yew, and I will give him his freedom for reward if he carves it true and lifelike."

Helma smiled. That was the greatest tribute Tros had paid to her, perhaps the greatest that he could pay. But Tros laughed, long and silently.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked him.

"To think what my stern old father would have said, to see a figure of a woman on my ship's bow! He would have spoken of the Roman Venus Genetrix, from whom Cæsar claims descent, and of the wharfs of Alexandria, and Ostia, and Massilia. However, my father is dead, I live. Helma, can you keep a secret, a tremendous secret, greater than all Cæsar's schemes?"

She nodded.

"The world is round!"

She nodded. She believed whatever Tros said. She would have believed it square, had he said so.

CHAPTER XLII

GALBA THE SICILIAN

> It is through the open gate of each man's treachery and idleness, that each man's enemy comes in.
>
> FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THE fence Tros had built around his shipyard was intended less to keep his own men in than to keep intruders out. There was no risk of his Northmen straying far; they had too recently been enemies of the Britons; they would have been unsafe almost anywhere on the countryside, and though they had received their nominal freedom at Tros's hands, they had neither goods nor money and would have found it next to impossible to make a living. Whereas Tros fed them royally, and they liked the work of ship-building.

His Britons, on the other hand, were slaves and, as such, cutlaws if they should dare to run away. Every slave-owner and every serf above the rank of slave, nominally free but not allowed to leave the land he tilled, would be in arms against them. Their only chance, if they should desert Tros, would be to do so in a body and take to the woods, driving off cattle and plundering lonely homesteads.

Delay, obstruction, interference came chiefly from without, and from two sources. First, those rebels had had women who depended on them, some unfit for service, some too young. Those clamored at the gate for food and shelter, and Tros fed them for a while, though he could ill afford it. Some he set to work at weaving and at making sails; others went to the ropewalk, where the linen cordage was twisted and tested. Some merely wailed and devoured good sustenance. They were all a nuisance. They all knew their men-folks' liberty was forfeited and that they must be left behind when the ship was launched and sailed away at last. To all intents and purposes their men were dead, as they would have been dead in fact—hung, burned alive, beheaded—had Tros not accepted them as Caswallon's gift.

A few at a time, the marriageable ones were absorbed into British families. A few of the older women died, mainly of misery, and some of the younger ones were taken by the druids to be kept as virgins in the sacred sisterhood. In the end the druids took all but a few and parceled them out around the countryside, obliging men of means to accept them as serving-women, whether useful or not. It was the few who remained after that who gave Tros the most trouble, nine women, their own fathers toiling at the heavy labor in the yard, upsetting discipline by siren-smiling at the Northmen overseers, who were human and young and not eager to be stayed by good advice.

Legally Tros might have sold those women. They were his. Daughters of traitors, captives of Caswallon's spear, they became, foot, hand and hide, the property of the king, who had waived possession in Tros's favor, although Caswallon himself took over their homes and goods. But there was something in Tros's obstinate nature that objected to that very commonplace proceeding. He did not even like the thought of selling men. He had bought men in days gone by to man oars in his father's ship, but had never sold them; he had never bought or sold a woman, and he did not propose to begin.

He tried discussing it with Sigurdsen. But Sigurdsen said, "Boys will be boys," and shrugged his shoulders. He talked it over with Helma, who chose one of them as maid and kept two alert blue eyes on her. But that left eight, and eight ownerless women can play havoc among thirty or forty homeless sailormen. He asked Caswallon's advice, but Caswallon only laughed.

"Nay, nay, Tros! I have my own task kinging it, and Lud knows there are too many women, what with Cæsar having killed so many young men on the beach, and Glendwyr's revolt, and one thing and another. Those girls are yours. By law you have to feed them or else deed them to some one who will. Put them to use, I would, but that is your affair."

The trouble of it was, that they were not bad-looking women of the swarthier, smaller type descended from tribes that inhabited Britain before the Britons came. They had the conquered disposition that takes a century or two to acquire and another century or two to overcome, a disposition to assume inferiority, social as well as moral, and to take other folks' assumption of a privilege for granted. But that also implied an ingrown subtlety and an alertness to take advantage of weakness wherever they found it or believed it to exist.

Tros's generosity was weakness in their eyes. They knew the law. They had no right to expect anything but slavery. If Tros had not helped Caswallon to suppress rebellion and so become possessed of their fathers and brothers along with themselves, their normal fate would have been to be swapped to the Iceni for horses, and thereafter possibly resold to the Northmen when the tradeships began coming from the Baltic in the spring. Or if, instead of tradeships, raiding parties should come, they might have been used to bribe the pirates to go away again.

Meanwhile, in the ropewalk they were more trouble than they were worth, since they needed so much supervision. They did not lay the linen fiber properly or twist it evenly unless watched all the time, and the men capable of supervising them were needed for at least equally important work elsewhere.

The other constant source of trouble was the visitors. The Britons came in droves to watch the ship-building, and there were many of them too important to be denied admission to the yard. No aristocrat, least of all Caswallon or his immediate friends, ever moved without a train of followers. They used to ride down or drive their two-horse wicker chariots and spend the day criticizing, asking questions and getting in everybody's way.

They were great humorists. One party of them asked Tros what name he intended to bestow on his great ship when it was finished. When he refused to tell, they named it for him—the dung ship, because of Eough's explorations in the cave beneath Caswallon's stable and the barrels full of yellowish crystals that had found their way subsequently to the yard. That name offended the Northmen mightily. There was very nearly a race riot that endangered the lives of all the Northmen in the yard.

The spice of that jest seemed never to lose its flavor. Britons would make their grooms pick up hot horse dung and offer it as payment for admission at the gate. And when Conops, resenting about the dozenth proffered offering of that kind, flung the stuff in the face of one of Caswallon's cousins, a fight ensued in which Conops used his knife, and Tros had to hand over two of his best British carpenters by way of damages.

But there was one man among the constant visitors who made trouble of a more perplexing sort. He was a Sicilian by the name of Galba, an attendant of Marius the Roman. Nothing could persuade Caswallon or his followers that a guest or a guest's companions might legitimately be regarded with suspicion. They said they were not spies. They were guests. Their word was taken for it, the aristocratic Britons having absurdly high-flung notions about chivalry. Marius and Galba had both eaten at Caswallon's table and were being entertained in the great house on Lud's Hill, Lunden Town. Ranking as Caswallon's guests, Tros had to endure both of them, he being also a guest in Britain and beholden to Caswallon for facilities to build his ship.

Galba came more frequently than Marius, gave himself lesser airs than the centurion did, but observed too closely and too much. He was apparently extremely aware of the fact that as a guest in Britain his life was sacrosanct and his liberty of movement unrestricted. Tros called him a spy to his face, but he only laughed and answered that Rome's eyes were as far-sighted as her arm was long. He followed that observation with a thinly veiled threat:

"What would the Britons do if they thought you were building this ship to use against them? A crew of Northmen, rebels, pirates—there are other kings beside Caswallon."

After that Tros gave the gods a dozen opportunities to terminate Galba's lease of life. Once, when he had a great beam hoisted, ready to be swung into the ship and Galba stood beneath it looking at a newly invented boring tool, Tros knocked out the ratchet that held the crane-winch. But the beam struck the sheer-strake as it fell and was deflected, missing Galba by more than a yard.

It was the same when bronze was being poured, and Galba stood close to the mold. Tros put a little water in a hollow of the fire-clay trough and stepped well out of range of the explosion. The trough was blown to pieces and about half the bronze was spilled, but Galba seemed to bear a charmed life; not even a drop of the white-hot metal touched him.

But the closest that Galba came to death was when Tros was trying out the forward starboard catapult before hoisting and installing it. It was a thing entirely of his own invention that avoided the use of the twisted sinew springs the Romans relied on and that were so affected by dampness, dry wind, friction, heat and cold.

Between two uprights, thirty feet high, with a big bronze pulley-wheel on top, he had a rectangular lead weight weighing a ton, encased in wicker-work and hoisted by a winch. When a lever was struck by a mallet, the weight fell, and the sudden force of that was transferred to the missile by means of ropes and a sliding mechanism that jerked the missile forward through a long trough, which could be moved on a hinge and turn-table to give the necessary angle and direction. To prevent the falling weight from injuring the bottom of the ship there was a cushion of willow wicker-work; and to secure the maximum efficiency and range, the force of the fall was transferred to the propelling mechanism just before the weight reached bottom.

The first shot Tros fired with his new invention—a lump of rock the size of a man's head—went clear across the Thames and knocked a branch from a tree a hundred yards beyond the farther mud-bank. It was the second shot that very nearly ended Galba's campaign of investigation.

Tros invited him to examine the mechanism, ordered the weight cranked up, and proceeded to show him the ingenious bronze levers by which the speed of the projecting instrument was multiplied. He persuaded Galba to lean over the trough to examine its oiled grooves, and then with his own hand struck the lever that released the weight. But Galba looked up to watch a wild goose flying overhead, so when the mechanism whizzed along its course his head still remained on his shoulders. But he grew very wary of Tros after that. He was a debonair, curly-headed, lightly framed Sicilian, who could be wary without inviting all the universe to pay attention to the fact.

So Tros wasted a lot more ingenuity in the vain effort to send Galba to another world without himself incurring the responsibility. He even went to the length of entertaining Galba by Helma's fireside, and was perfectly frank with Galba concerning the reason for it:

"You are Cæsar's spy. For all I know, you may have been sent to murder me. In Britain, if you murder a man whose food you have eaten, without first serving notice on him that you have become his enemy, they first torture you and then burn you to death."

"I am no man's enemy," said Galba, sipping at Tros's mead and apple guardedly, as if he thought it might be poisoned. "I studied philosophy in Syracuse. I believe that a man should attend strictly to his own conduct and leave others to govern themselves. Then such gods as there are, and whatever they are, preserve a man. They seem to have preserved me," he added pointedly.

"Nevertheless, I will make it known that you have eaten at my table," Tros remarked.

Galba spoke Gaulish with the skill of an intellectual, and that was the only tongue that Tros and Helma had as yet in common. Tros knew Greek, Latin and all the tongues of the Levant, including the Phœnician and Arabic, the Aramaic dialects and at least a smattering of Coptic. Helma knew only her own Norse and the Gaulish dialect men spoke in that corner of Britain, which differed only slightly in pronunciation from the speech of northern Gaul.

So it did not take the observant Galba any time at all to discover that the relationship between Tros and Helma was on a very different basis from that of, say, a Sicilian and his wife, or a Greek and the prospective mother of his sons. They stood more on a basis of equality and there was confidence between them, as if they shared together a tremendous secret.

Tros did not appear to be in love with his young wife or in love with anything except his ship, but he appeared to take it for granted that Helma also loved the ship, to regard her as a practical independent ally pledged to one course with himself. And that is a much more unbreakable bond between two people than any emotional love affair.

The confidence was proven by Tros's entire willingness to let Helma converse with strangers. In fact, he seemed to like her to take the burden of conversation, he alternately listening and lapsing into a brown study. Most of the time it was impossible to tell whether Tros was interested or was visioning new details for his ship; but when referred to, he invariably had an answer ready.

So Galba made Helma's acquaintance carefully at Tros's fireside after the meal, while the slave-girl washed the dishes and Tros, in his great oak chair, removed the gold band from his forehead, solid, beaten from one of Cæsar's wreaths to replace the ancient one he had broken and bound on Helma's arm that night he married her. It was heavy, and he liked to lay his head back and his feet up while he rested.

The Sicilian was an artful talker, not too ingratiating, not too given to open flattery, rather frankly curious, making his approach to Helma as he had approached Tros's shipyard, on a basis of privilege that might not be denied. He explained that he was one of Cæsar's gatherers of information about foreign lands. Cæsar was writing a book, omniverous of facts. Could Helma tell him of the distant north from which she came?

So Helma told tales of the Baltic, and of the long nights farther north than that, where winter reigns for seven months, and of summers when there was no night. She told of fishing and of great whales, of fjords where the pines came to the water's edge and fishing fleets might be land-locked for a month on end by winds that blew forever from the westward and the northwest.

"And that is why Northmen are good at the oar, and why their ships are built to sail into the wind."

Presently, because Galba urged, she sang, her fingers plucking at imaginary harp strings and her strong young voice athrill with the heroic mystery of legend. But the words were Norse and neither Tros nor Galba understood them. Nevertheless, Tros leaned forward in his chair to listen, and the lean-lipped, sarcastic Galba changed color, drumming in time to the song with those dark-skinned, deceitful fingers that looked capable of anything at all except hard work.

And so—because if you sing to a man of what your heart knows, you have given to him something you can not recall—there began a kind of intimacy, guarded indeed since Helma knew Tros mistrusted Galba, and she, too, mistrusted him; and not immoderately emphasized by Galba, who was subtle even in his method of discarding subtlety.

In his own turn Galba sang of Syracuse and of the wars of Sicily, of Carthage and of tyrants who played a losing hazard of intrigue between the Wolf of the Aventines and the Punic Lion.

Then Tros sang about Jason and the Golden Fleece, in a basso voice that crashed among the roof-beams, his eyes glowing as he all unconsciously revealed the grandeur of his own hopes and the splendor of his zeal to conquer far horizons. The words were Greek and Galba understood them; even he, though the apostle of all cynicism, understood Tros's heart was on his lips that hour and more than ancient legend was unrolling to the sea-wave tune. The words might crash on the ancient beaches of an unknown Euxine shore; but to Helma, ignorant of Greek, and to Galba, ignorant of all but cynicism, there swung into the mental vision paths along the moonbeams to a chartless ocean where the sea-birds were the pilots, and the lure lay in a man's own heart, not in the chink of commerce nor the clash of arms, nor even in the thump of oar-beats or the thunder of the wind in straining sails, though the thunder and the oar-beats seemed to pulse an obbligato to the song.

And then Tros sang of the fall of Troy. He sang the Trojan view of it. Of Helen, fair-haired Helen, whom the Trojans thought worth dying for. He made a mystery of vision and ideals, raped from Greece—unworthy of them—and defended against all the gods of greed and envy and the men who hate those who have done what they failed to do themselves.

"In the end you will die for a woman's sake," said Galba when

Tros ceased singing and coughed, because the blue smoke filled his lungs. But Helma shook her head, thought otherwise.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE CONFERENCE OF KINGS

Instead of blaming one another for the flood, have ye thought yet about aiding one another to withstand it?

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

MARIUS and Galba gave Tros less anxiety than did Taliesan, the Lord High Druid, and certain British kings who jumped at opportunity to balk Caswallon. Galba's veiled threat materialized. Some said the Romans, through spies, had corrupted those kings, and that might be, for the Roman spies were everywhere. But none spoke of Taliesan except with awe. However, Fflur said they were jealous of her husband and suspected him of planning to make himself the paramount chief of Britain.

"Whereas," said Fflur, discussing events with Tros and Helma up on the stern of the big ship amid the din of hammer-blows, "if they only would believe it, he would rather hunt deer and make merry than anything else the gods permit. He is too easy-going, too generous, too ready to make friends."

But Fflur was the daughter of Mygnach the Dwarf, and there was more insight and hind- and fore-sight in her heritage than in that of most women. She looked nearly young enough to be the sister of her oldest son; and yet there was old wisdom in her eyes and something akin to fear, as if she could see too much but could avoid too little.

There was Gwanar, king of the Iceni, breeder of horses and more or less ruler of hard-bitten men who were forever coming southward to Caswallon's country to sell mares. Gwanar and Fflur were first cousins, which tended to a peaceful settlement of most disputes, but Gwanar had not sent men to resist Cæsar's first invasion, and he either believed or pretended to believe that the Roman would never repeat the attempt.

Then there was Caradoc of the Silures, who dwelt in the west where druidism was far more than a religion; it was almost life itself. Caradoc might not have interfered; he was of the darker, swarthier type of Briton, of Iberian ancestry, and his lands were too remote for him to have troubled his head about Caswallon's alleged ambitions. But Madoc, king of the Coranians, had married his sister, who was known as a wise woman, wiser than Fflur. Madoc sent ambassadors to the Iceni and Caradoc followed suit.

They three brought in Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici, lover of his own importance, bottle-nosed and crippled of one arm, who loved intrigue far better than plain dealing. Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici agitated and accused Caswallon to the druids, mainly about Tros, whom he had never seen, until there was nothing left to do but summon a five-king conference.

The druids would have preferred to avoid it. They were not in love with Tros, although they regarded his father, Perseus, as a high priest, greater than all but a few of themselves. But they were not against him. And they were the only authorities who could guarantee the holding of such a conference without mismanagement or bloodshed.

Normally the druids took no part in politics, but they recognized no boundaries to their own influence, which was as nearly entirely spiritual as it could be kept. Their supremacy was everywhere conceded, and they performed the ceremonies when a king was girdled with the gold insignia of office. Without the druids' sanction there could be no kings. Their mound-encircled hospices were held so sacred that no king would have dared or would have dreamed of daring to enter without permission, or to hale forth even a murderer who had taken refuge there.

And the druids did interfere whenever the kings exceeded their proper authority or entered into combinations against one another. They were ever ready with advice when asked. They sometimes volunteered it. They were held in such universal awe and reverence that if they told a king to abdicate he had no choice but to obey.

So it was always druids who presided when the kings met; druids who sent the invitations, although it was usually kings who pulled the wires that set druids' influence in motion.

"What I need," said Caswallon to Tros one day when the invitation had arrived, "is an army of ten thousand men, ready to resist Cæsar. Then Cæsar would never invade. What they fear is that if I had such an army at my beck and call, I would use it to subdue all Britain. If the druids should say yes, then I could have the army in a week. If they say no, then I shall never have it."

"If Cæsar should come, the druids would suffer most of all. He hates them. They know it. Surely they will let you have the army, since it is your land that will be invaded first," Tros answered.

Caswallon shook his head. He knew the druids, feared them, loved them in his own way, which was wholly Celtic. And he knew those rival kings.

"We will go," he said, "and at least thereafter we shall know the worst."

So Helma went with Fflur to stay at Merrow, where there was a sacred pool and near that, a farm belonging to Caswallon, they taking with them all those nine British slave-women who had given Tros such trouble. Fflur had a notion she could find them husbands among the hinds who watched sheep on Merrow Downs. Tros, yielding to Caswallon's importunity, spared three clear days of winter sunshine when the planking of the upper deck was being laid, dreading lest the parsimonious Sigurdsen should skimp the oil on the layer of linen between the double planking, or lest they should omit to cramp the woodwork properly before they drove the spikes, and went with Caswallon to the druids' mound-encircled hospice near by Verulam.

"Old, old as the hills is Verulam. There is the mint, and there my father lived. Lud's blood! He had a good house, but I let the druids have it when Taliesan came from the west. They keep the mint, which makes the gold and silver safe enough," Caswallon said as he drove at his usual speed, as fast as the gray stallions could lay hoof to ground, with Tros up beside him in the wicker-bodied chariot. "Verulam is a healthier place than Lunden. Better hunting, better pasture for the horses, no fogs from the river to give a man Lud's ague, higher ground, better in every way. But no druid, no king! I was proud that I had my father's house to give to Taliesan. He came and blessed my new house that I built in Lunden, saying it should not fall by fire or to a foeman in my day."

They did not go unattended. There was Orwic, at the head of four-and-twenty gentlemen-at-arms—the aristocratic caste, descendants of tribes who came from oversea three centuries before. Landholders, rich in their own right, who might not be denied the privilege of riding escort to the king, as well as of knowing nearly all his business. Behind them rode as many grooms and servants, most of whom were not so fair-haired or so light-complexioned, some of mixed blood.

Caswallon did not talk much during the long drive through the forest. He frowned and muttered to himself, impatient when they halted at a mound-encircled roadhouse to change teams, refusing drink, eager to be off again.

"Brother Tros, we shall need our wits," he said at last. "Lord Druid Taliesan is a brother of gods, wiser than Merlin, and he loves me. But there are Caradoc, Gwanar, Gwenwynwyn, Madoc, of whom two are crafty men, and two are fools. It is what you and I will say that *must* solve this riddle by persuading Taliesan. I wish my tongue were readier and my heart less so."

"Keep an open mind. Play my hand and I will play yours," Tros advised him.

"Good! Stand you by me."

Thereafter not one word until they galloped down a lane between enormous oaks and came on to the rising open ground by Verulam, where the druids' white hospice that was once Caswallon's father's house, gleamed in the setting sun above the turfed mound that surrounded it. The turf showed brown through rotting snow, and the roof was green and gray in patches where the lichen edged the shingles. It was an enormous house, built mainly of adze-hewn timber.

There was a gathering of wool-robed druids, and the mighty Taliesan himself in the midst of them by the gate in the gap in the encircling mound, but no sign of any other kings, although the hour was late.

"If we come first, good. And if we come last, better. Lud deliver us if we are neither first nor last," Caswallon said, screwing up his eyes to scan the group of druids. "The first and last create a stir. Kings who are neither first nor last are nobodies."

There was a stir, at any rate, a fanfare of golden trumpets. The druids received their guests with song and with holly garlands, even hanging wreaths on the horses' necks that pricked them and made them frantic. But that gave Caswallon a chance to display his horsemanship, which he enjoyed. He reined in the maddened stallions, tossed the reins to a groom who charged up in the nick of time, leaped to the ground and knelt for the old High Druid's blessing. Tros knelt beside him. Then they entered by a wide gate through an embankment supported on the inside by a wall of heavy timber, up which ivy climbed, a century old, its main stems thicker than a man's thigh.

Behind the chanting druids Caswallon and Tros went arm-in-arm. They looked like two kings, not a king and his attendant, because Tros had donned his purple cloak for the occasion, bordered deep with gold embroidery. His deep-sea rolling stride was more majestic than Caswallon's, who had lived too long on horseback to walk handsomely. But neither of them held a candle to the old Lord Druid at the head of the procession—not for dignity or grace or majesty or any other attribute.

"Good! We are the last!" Caswallon whispered, and he kept the whole company waiting a good ten minutes longer while he and Tros washed themselves in a room to the left of the door.

There were four kings standing in a row before the hearth in the great inner hall, and on the far side of the round table and two long ones was a crowd of their retainers, counselors, gentlemen-at-arms, bards, minstrels—crushing toes and shoving one another for the front rank.

The round table was on a dais that occupied about a quarter of the floor space at the farther end. From the dais to the door the two long tables were set parallel, spread with linen cloth and silver and pewter dishes. But the round table was spread with a finer cloth, bearing designs dyed in three colors. Its plates were of gold, the cups of colored glass, gold-edged.

The huge hall was entirely lined with dark oak, and there was a high gallery around three sides, over which whispering druids leaned. They burst into welcoming song as Caswallon entered, and the four kings by the hearth stiffened themselves to show their breeding in four different ways—surly, supercilious, suspicious, condescending.

However, Caswallon out-kinged them. He stood, his followers in a formidable crowd behind, and let the old High Druid introduce him, as if he had never before seen one of those kings, was rather curious to know them and quite willing to be kissed on both cheeks, provided, by standing on tiptoe, they could reach that far.

"The Lord Caswallon! The Lord Tros!" said an announcer by the door. It might have been one of Caswallon's followers.

Young Orwic was quite capable of that.

"The Lord Caswallon! The Lord Tros!" the old Lord Druid repeated. And the four kings had to leave the hearth to come and kiss Caswallon, since he would not go to them.

They were neither shabby men nor insignificant. They stood like kings and were more richly costumed than Caswallon. Gwenwynwyn, king of the Ordovici, he of the bottle nose, was dressed in cloth of gold with gold and amber ornaments. The others wore dyed woolen stuff and cloaks of imported Gaulish broadcloth trimmed with fur. They all wore gold chains and the royal golden girdle at their waists, but Caswallon and Tros, almost without an ornament between them, except Tros's jeweled sword-hilt and the gold forehead band, out-braved them, nevertheless.

There was that about Caswallon in his plain, dyed wool and beautifully made cloak of figured deerskin, edged with gold and blue, that no amount of ornament could offset. He looked open-countenanced and honest. His emotions were there for the world to see depicted on his face, and they were manly. When he laughed it meant he was amused. If he frowned he was angry. When he looked at the old Lord Druid he was half afraid and half affectionate. When four kings kissed him he was perfectly aware they did it with suppressed hate, and his face showed tolerant understanding of their jealousy.

He pulled Tros forward by the arm and made them kiss Tros, too. There was no way for them to refuse without open violence to the laws of British courtesy. Then he had them greet and give the curt, perfunctory embrace to every one of his escort, taking each one by the arm in turn to name him.

"So that is good. To-night, at least, there will be no stabbing in the back," he laughed. Before they realized what he was doing he had taken precedence and was following the old Lord Druid to the dais and the round table where five other druids already waited.

So because he drew Tros with him arm-in-arm, he and Tros had seats on either hand of the old prelate with druids on either side of them again. The other kings had no choice but to take the remaining seats, some with their backs to the two long tables. Druid and king alternated all around the table, none challenging Tros's right to royal honors, although Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici scowled at him and took offense when he laid his jewel-hilted sword beneath his chair.

"You—you should have left that outside," he objected.

"Not with you near!" Tros retorted. They two were foes by instinct, without given cause or reason, which is the deadliest kind of enmity, the easiest to fan into a blaze, the least responsive to the efforts of any peace-maker.

When the followers of all five kings had elbowed and quarreled enough and had all found places at last at the two long tables, with monk-robed druids behind them to act the hospitable part of serving-men, there was a note struck on a golden gong, which set the key for a hymn to Mother Nature, of which every man in Britain knew the words from end to end. The old Lord Druid led the singing, but grew silent after the first few measures. The choir in the gallery wove harmonies under the carved ceiling beams. The gentlemen-at-arms and serving druids thundered the refrain. Then silence, and a blessing from the old Lord Druid in a voice that sounded like the rolling of the wheels of golden destiny.

Druids lit the sconces then, as if that were ritual. There was a rutching of the benches as men took their seats, and silence, broken only by such noises as a man must make if he chews meat with an open mouth and breathes through his nose because his mouth is full; that, the clatter of plates and the opening and closing of two doors, through which the druids brought endless quantities of things to eat. All hungry. All on their best behavior.

At the round table the silence was almost agonizing, each royal guest staring at Caswallon and Tros between mouthfuls, doing his best to stare them out of countenance and getting better than he gave, until the Lord Druid spoke at last and loosed their tongues. There was none, unless possibly Tros—he lacked the Celtic sense of reverence—who would have dared to speak until the prelate had spoken first.

The old man merely asked Caswallon how the roads were on the way to Lunden. But, that being Britain, the dam was down then and there began at once a crossfire conversation about horses, hunting, fishing, scarcity of wild geese and the quality of last year's oat crop. Babbling noise from the lower room told that the gentlemen-at-arms were also talking horse. Minute after minute the whole atmosphere grew friendlier.

Caswallon told a story about a favorite mare of his that bore two foals, both skew-bald, and how the three together drew his chariot until the Romans came and they were drowned in the surf "all three fighting with their teeth against Cæsar's legions."

Gwanar, king of the Iceni, capped that with a story of a stallion that carried a fat man from sea to sea, the breadth of Britain, without rest or food. Not to be out-boasted by those two, Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici told of a giant among his people who could lift a grown horse on his shoulders and carry the struggling beast from one town to the next.

Thereafter Tros told of sights he had seen by land and sea, and that was entertainment to which even the Lord Druid listened eagerly. He spoke of the Pharos lighthouse, visible on a dark night from seventy miles away at sea,* whose giant lenses were of glass, made in Arabia, whose flame was from a rare oil found in the earth beyond the eastern Euxine shore, whose marble tower contained an engine worked by steam that hoisted the fuel and supplies out of boats in the sea below.

Then he told of the fane of Diana at Ephesus "all overlaid with silver," and of the temple at Jerusalem "of cedar and gold and stones ten cubits long," where, on feast days, it took from dawn to dark to slay the sacrifice, so many hecatombs of beasts were brought. And he spoke of King Ptolemy's palace on the Lochias at Alexandria "all hung with silk from somewhere east of the rising sun." He spoke of the wealth of Egypt, of the corn-ships that sailed in fleets bearing grain by the million bushels.

And presently the Gaulish wine began to flow, the druids only sipping theirs, but the five kings drinking deep. The gentlemen-at-arms were served with mead, and not too much of it. Drunk or sober they would not dare to offend the druids, but with too much mead in him, a man might forget wherein offense consists. Tros added water to his wine and noticed that the old High Druid did the same.

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* Doubtless Tros exaggerated.

In course of time, when the edge of a winter's appetite was dulled, the minstrels tuned their harps, each king's musician striving to excel with songs about ancient heroes. But as soon as each song was finished the druid's choir in the gallery sang sacred harmonies that took the fight out of the gentlemen-at-arms, restoring them to more or less subdued exhilaration.

Then, when enough wine had been drunk at the round table, the old Lord Druid made a signal and an attendant in the gallery struck the golden gong. He arose in the silence that followed, blessed them with murmuring lips and ancient ritual of movement, then stood for a moment with eyes gazing, as it were, through walls into another world. White beard falling to his waist, white hair on his upright shoulders, he looked like Time himself.

"My sons," he began at last, "O Lord Caswallon of the Trinobantes, Lord Tros of Samothrace, Lord Gwanar of the Iceni, Lord Madoc of the Coranians, Lord Caradoc of the Silures, Lord Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici, noblemen of the escorts, priests of the Ancient Mystery, we welcome you in the name of Fire, Air, Earth and Water."

His voice was a singer's, trained to stir the audience and play on their aroused emotion as plucked harp-strings play on ears awakened by the drum.

"This life," he said after a moment's pause, "this little life we live, that flickers, burns into a man and flickers out again, is but one grain of sand upon a seashore, one drop in all the ocean of Eternity, one link amid the endless chains of lives we live, living and dying, living and dying, as the tides flow, as the day succeeds the night and seasons follow seasons in the cycles of the law. O ye, who measure life by hours and years, I bid you heed Eternity."

Thereafter, following a long, dramatic pause, he spoke of manhood and its debt to Mother Nature; he praised bravery and courtesy and all the qualities of mind and body that the Britons held in high esteem, until their eyes burned at the thought of heroes who had died defending homes against the raider, and a stir, like the breath of a breeze among trees, went through the audience.

Then, subtly, as he wove his words into a skein of golden music, thrilling them with pride in their high birth, and their descent from gods who walked on earth with men, he began to sound a warning note, at first a mere suggestion, then a hint.

"Last night I saw a falling star. Take heed lest ye fall."

That note set the key to his conclusion. He denounced all strife, but first and foremost all internal strife. He told them that the fate of Gaul, downtrodden under Cæsar's heel, was due to the Gauls' unrighteousness, their quarreling among themselves, their deafness to druidic warnings and their listening to unwise agitators who had counseled them to take the sword instead of communing with the gods "who know men's destiny and are nearer than a man's breath, closer to him than his thinking."

He wetted his lips at a cup of amethyst and dried them on a linen towel passed to him by an attendant, then continued:

"Take not too much upon yourselves, nor trust too little in the gods who upreared Britain from the sea. The Gauls have fallen. They have made their druids suffer for their sins. Take heed lest ye do likewise."

Then he blessed them sonorously, kings and all their followers standing with heads bowed. The druids in the gallery chanted a response; and then he led the way in silence, followed by five kings, by Tros and by the five druids who had sat at table with them, through a door on the right of the dais into another room to hold the conference.

CHAPTER XLIV

CASWALLON'S ULTIMATUM

As the wind bloweth, I go now, and ye know not whither. With a warm breath I have blown upon your seedlings. I have blessed you as the warm rain. Aye, and from the northeast, icy and stern was the blast of my indignation against the weeds of treachery—against the waste of your unclean furrows and the falsehood of the broken barns, wherein the mice ate the seed I gave without stint. Now look ye to the harvest, for I go, and neither tears nor bell nor burning sacrifice shall summon me again to teach anew what I have taught so often that your ears are weary and ye are fat from hearing but not doing.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

IT was a large room, hung with embroidered woolen draperies, containing a fireplace nearly as large as the one in the hall they had left. Twelve high-backed chairs, gilded and carved, like thrones, were set in a wide semicircle facing the hearth. A druid signified to each guest which his chair should be, and then the Lord Druid sat on the one in the midst that was raised on a stand six inches higher than the others.

Tros, with a druid beyond him, had a chair near the hearth. Caswallon faced him in the end chair on the right. Kings and druids alternated, with Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici, dark-faced, bottle-nosed and sly, on the old Lord Druid's right.

For a while they sat and warmed themselves in silence, all apparent good-will and well-fed contentment, except that Gwenwynwyn's smile foreboded trouble, and the shorter, dark-haired king of the Silures, Caradoc, watched him nervously, as if he were pledged to a certain course and dreaded it.

At last the old Lord Druid broke the silence, elbow on the chair-arm, cheek on hand, his voice as gentle as if he spoke to respectful children:

"My sons, I will speak of something that is simple, yet too easily forgotten. There were Britons in Britain before your forebears came. Ye call yourselves Britons without knowing why or what the word means. Some of your forebears came here from the eastward, crossing the sea in big flat-bottomed boats, because they were driven forth by men who had no liking for their strange gods. Here they found a swarthier, gentler people. Some they conquered, and with some they made treaties, living in armed suspicion side by side with them.

"Now this is a mystery. Ye all say ye are Britons, except the Lord Tros, whose father was a Greek, and yet whose mother was as much a Briton as the rest of you."

Tros stared. His father might have spoken to the druids of Gaul, who, in turn, might have told the secret to the British druids.

"Ye know how rivers run," the old man went on in his gentle yet majestic voice. "A trickle, then a brook, then many little brooks, and then, at last, the river rolling seaward. All of it drops of water, rolling whence? Some rivers split and flow along two courses to the sea. Yet they are one and the same river, and the water comes from the self-same brooks, mingled and blended together, even as men are mingled and blended together from many sources, and become a race that flows on to its destiny.

"The Lord Tros's mother was of the race from which many of you who call yourselves Britons, are descended. It is the mothers who bear the sons, who are the channels in which the streams of human races run.

"And now I will speak of a greater mystery. They who had invaded these isles found here an ancient wisdom, older than their own idolatry. Lo, it had been always in the world. Their very ancient ancestors had known it, but had fallen into darkness. It was ancient. It was wise. And it reabsorbed them. They were as children coming home. They abandoned all their false gods, even as a river's branch goes wandering, and comes back to the stream at last.

"Now, yet another mystery. There were conquests here in Britain long before your forebears' time. The swarthier tribes they found here had themselves been conquerors in their day, coming from the south, so long ago that none remembers when; yet the tribes whom they found, themselves had come centuries before they did from a continent that disappeared under the sea, because the guardians of the law grew weary of its wickedness.

"Yet even they, who came from lost Atlantis, found, already here before them, druids who preserved the ancient wisdom. The ancient wisdom took them to herself and prospered them until they lost the key. Then others came, then others. Stronger men forever replace weaker men, as spring prevails over the decaying winter and as winter in its turn destroys the autumn foliage and covers all with snow. But beneath the snow life lives. None slays life, although he kills the body. None slays wisdom, though he act however foolishly.

"So they who were the keepers of the ancient wisdom, whom ye call druids—though there was another name for them in those days—prevailed over all conquerors, simply because of wisdom, forever forfeiting the semblances as trees let go their leaves when winter comes, but husbanding the sap in which lies the secret of life.

"Men who were mighty men of war found they must come to the druids for wisdom. The druids knew that conquests and reconquests are a little matter, being no more than the ebb and flow of tides within the tides of evolution in the destiny of man. They were able to give wise advice, well knowing that tides can come and go without blood poured on the rocks of hatred.

"The conquerors learned to listen, and grew spiritual in the paths of peace. Men die. And races die. The very rocks die, and are turned into tree-bearing earth, drenched by the rain and washed by streams and rivers to the sea, to become who knows what future continents. Those rocks that endure the longest, in the end are broken by the builder, by the icefield, by the earthquake. Even the sun will die when it has run its course, until a time shall come when even the sun is born again.

"What dies is but the outer shape. When ye are dead, ye are reborn into another mold and even the dead mold ye used is shredded up into its elements and used by trees and what not else in the unceasing alchemy of nature.

"And now observe—a tide comes. Shall men resist it? Rome comes on a tide of destiny—an old wolf, wise in war, serving and served by evil. What did it avail the men who fought your forebears? To this day they are slaves, a subject race. Yet, notwithstanding, such small vision as remained to them, ye, conquering them, have copied, abandoning the idols that your forebears brought over the sea and honoring the wisdom we taught, we, the druids.

"Had they not fought your forebears, they had not been conquered. Not a druid would have died, impaled by the new invaders. Hear me! It is not three hundred years since men, whose very names ye bear, were hunting down the druids here in Britain. Why? Because the blood-lust came of fighting. They believed the druids taught the men who defended Britain to resist them with bloodshed and anger. Whereas the druids taught the contrary, but they were deaf, and would not listen. And so your forebears slew the druids, even as the Romans do in Gaul and as they will do here in Britain if ye offer them resistance.

"Our wisdom bids us think in centuries, whereas ye think in terms of hours. So I say make peace with the Romans, for they come like an advancing tide. If ye make peace, ye may absorb their strength and, keeping peace, give no excuse to them to wreak their savagery. Thus, we who serve the ancient wisdom may prevail over their ignorance and, taking no account of time—which is a little matter—conquer Rome in peace!

"If ye take arms against the Romans, it may be ye may hold them for a year or five or fifty. But in the end they will overwhelm you and their last fury will be ten times greater than the first."

He was speaking to Tros as much as to the five kings. They heard him in breathless silence knowing he spoke of realities, distinguished from the unrealities that impose themselves as daily life. They knew that behind his words there was another meaning, and an inner within that, to which none but druids held the key. Not one, not even Tros, the son of an Initiate of Samothrace, but that respected him as a man who walked with gods and communed with them hourly.

But Gwenwynwyn, king of the Ordovici, rubbed his bottle nose and sought to twist that pause to his advantage, he being one of those who can see no profit to himself unless another loses. He feared Caswallon's power. He hated Tros without rhyme or reason.

"Lord Dragon," he began, in a voice that was as soft and gentle as his face was sly—for he came from the far west, many days' ride distant beyond the mountains from a country where men's voices were as musical as rain—"we ourselves know your words are true and sacred. But I am told the Lord Caswallon helps the Lord Tros to build a warship on the river near-by his town of Lunden. I am told, too, that he lent him men to raid Gaul. Is that the way to make the Romans treat us peacefully?"

Caswallon raised his fist to smite the chair-arm, but checked himself respectfully in time.

"Lord Druid," he said, forcing his voice to moderation, "you spoke of holding Rome at bay maybe for fifty years. That is a man's life. Shall we not play each of us a man's part if we resist the Romans that long? If I should leave my corner of Britain free, I would not fear to meet the judges of the dead. Did Fflur, the mother of my sons, bear men to wear the Roman yoke?"

The rebuke he received was swift and chilling.

"How free is your corner of Britain now?" the old prelate asked sternly. "Are there no slaves?"

Gwenwynwyn laughed. Caswallon put his head between his hands and sighed. But Gwanar, king of the Iceni, did not care to see Caswallon grinned at by a man who came from so far to the westward that one might almost say he was a foreigner. Gwanar's way was blunt and bluff when the Lord Druid's eyes were not directed at him.

"Why does the Lord Tros build the ship?" he asked. "What can he tell us about that and about Gaul and Cæsar? That is"—he had caught the eye of Taliesan—"if your holiness permits."

Tros rose to his feet, and his sword that he had leaned against the chair, dropped to the floor with a clatter that startled all of them.

"Lord Taliesan, lords of Britain," he began.

The five kings shuddered when he used the Lord Druid's name, but the old man, leaning to rest his chin on a hand far whiter than a woman's, nodded him permission to continue.

"Lord Taliesan, most reverend druids, lords of Britain," he began again, "I am a blunt man. I am not schooled in subtleties of discourse. I am used to shipboard, where the gear, aye, and the wind and every detail of the ship is known by its proper name to save confusion. I pray you bear with me if I call danger by its right name.

"I have kept peace where the other man would let me all my days. I have seen peace broken for the sake of plunder, for the love of women and for revenge. Cæsar, the Roman, adds thereto a fourth way—ambition, greater than any the world has ever seen. Aye, greater than Alexander's. He is learned. He is the first of Rome's high priests.* Cæsar can split with you the fine hairs of philosophy and law. But he will come with legions and tax-gatherers. And when he goes, it will be with chains of prisoners, leaving his lieutenants to complete the harvest he began, a harvest of money and slaves.

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* Pontifex Maximus—an office that Cæsar held almost as soon as he was old enough to wear the toga. Tros undoubtedly understood that this office was mainly political, but he also knew that his hearers, except perhaps the druids, did not understand that.

"The Lord Caswallon is for making ready one more—one last time, to smite the Roman legions when they set foot on the shore of Britain. I warn you, you will lose all and, not least, your old religion, unless the Lord Caswallon shall prevail over the Roman when that day comes.

"I know Gaul. End to end I know it. I have seen, with these eyes I have seen the druids burned alive by Romans, their own Gauls not daring to prevent. Druids I have seen, tied hand and foot and five together, roasted over slow fires while the legions cheered."

There was a chorus of sibilant ejaculations. Not a king there but would rather die in agony himself than see a druid harmed. But the old Lord Druid nodded to Tros to continue.

"I came to Gaul to help the druids. For the druids' sake my father died, tortured to death by Cæsar because he would not tell Cæsar the druids' secrets. I am no favorer of bloodshed, but I warn you, you must save this Isle of Britain from the Romans, or the ancient wisdom that your druids serve will become but a myth, a memory. Men will know no more of it.

"Rome tolerates all creeds, all priesthoods save and except that ancient wisdom. She guts, defiles and burns out by the roots whoever and whatever teaches that Rome—rotten, bold and greedy—is not immortal, the beginning and the end.

"Water will rust iron," he said, looking straight at the old high priest. "I know, none better, that if the Romans conquer Britain, and though they rip the carcasses of all the druids into bleeding clay, or throw them living into the arena to be burned or torn by dogs, the soul of your religion will persist. In the end it will weaken Rome, as water corrodes iron. But the water will be stained, poisoned until none can drink it."

He paused, looked at the five kings one by one, and then again at the white-haired Taliesan.

"I saw a man in Syria, who knew the secret of the fire. He carried hot coals in his hands. He walked on a bed of burning charcoal. He was unhurt. Scornful of men's ignorance or, it may be, pitying them, he bade them do the same. Some listened. I have seen the burned hands and the tortured feet of men who did obey him.

"You see me. I am a navigator. I can sail a ship through storm and darkness, leagues beyond sight of land, and make my landfall. Shall I laugh and bid a landsman do the same?

"I have seen the Lord Caswallon ride an untamed horse, sitting the frantic beast as easily as I stand on a heaving poop or climb to a masthead. Shall he bid me ride the horse because he knows the trick of it?

"Shall a woman bid a man bear children?

"I have heard said and I believe you holy druids understand far more of the laws of life than ordinary mortals do. I see that kings pay homage to you. In all modesty I tender mine. And yet, no doubt because you must, you keep those holy secrets to yourselves as intimately as a woman keeps the secret of gestation in her womb.

"Because and if you know how to prevail against the iron heel of Rome, by dying, maybe as a tree dies that the seed may live, shall ye bid men who do not understand your Mysteries to do the same?

"Behold me. No man ever lived or shall live who can make me strike one blow against another country's freedom. Saving your holy presence, none shall stay my hand from striking against Rome, if blow of mine can check that wolf-brood's cruel course!

"Slaves are there in Britain? Holy Taliesan, Rome eats slaves as fire eats fuel! She imports them by the hundred thousand and they die like droves of rats. They sell the women to be perched in chairs along the mean streets to solicit passers-by. They send the strong young men into the arena to die fighting one another or to be tossed by bulls or torn by hungry brutes. They sell the heart-broken and unresisting to the landowners to toil under the lash on farms, thus forcing their own Italian freemen to become soldiers, since there is no work left for them to do. The soldiers go forth conquering more countries, capturing more slaves, plundering more treasuries for gold with which Rome may gorge herself."

He paused.

"I build a ship. By the Lord Caswallon's leave I build a ship. I build her to defend myself against the Romans and to set forth seeking some far corner of the earth that Rome has not polluted."

He stooped, picking up his sword and held it by the scabbard, shaking it above his head.

"I crave peace," he said in his ringing voice that thrilled with love of action. "My heart yearns for the sunlit skies, stars and the open sea. It is enough for me to wage that war within me that a man must before he may dare to hope for freedom. But I love life. It pleases me to call no king my master and to bind myself to obey no senate's bribed and compromised decrees. Of all things, independence is my first love, freedom to go how, when and whither I will. Yet I say this—"

He paused dramatically, lowered the sword and leaned both hands on it.

"What I seek for myself, I will deny to no other man. What I seek for myself, I will fight for for another's sake. Myself, my ship, my men and all I have are at your service, if you yourselves will fight for your own freedom."

He sat down amid grunts of approval, and Caswallon spanked his hand down on the chair-arm. But the druids sat still, and Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici, on the prelate's right hand, took advantage of the ensuing silence.

"Why do they call it the dung ship?" he asked in his suave, soft, musical voice.

And three kings laughed. Gwenwynwyn dropped more water on the fire:

"Myself, I have come a very long way to discuss peace in the presence of the son of the Dragons. I could have heard the dunghill cockadoodles at home."

"Lud's blood!" Caswallon was quicker on his feet than Tros, but the old Lord Druid checked them both with no more than a gesture.

"No oaths here!" he said sternly. "No violence!"

They two sat down again, and both men looked ashamed.

"I have heard that the Lord Tros consults sorcerers about the dung and such matters as that," Gwenwynwyn added.

"Peace!" Taliesan commanded. "Lord Gwanar, let us hear your view of this."

But Gwanar, king of the Iceni, came from Lindum where impenetrable marshes to the south and eastward circled and divided up the pasture land. So were men's minds, definite and plain in some things but venturing with caution onto unknown ground. He rose to his feet:

"Lord Druid, might we hear the Lord Caswallon first?"

The prelate nodded. Caswallon rose, the firelight showing up the woad-blue patterns on his white wrist as he twisted his moustache. Anger blazed in him when he met Gwenwynwyn's eyes, but he controlled it when the old Lord Druid frowned.

"Brother of gods," he began, then threw both hands behind him and his chin up in a gesture of resolution. "Like the Lord Tros I have sought peace, and I think you know that. I continue to seek peace. But the Cantii, to the southward, look to me to help them repel Cæsar, who has sent ambassadors to me. I have not yet answered those ambassadors, except with a challenge to Cæsar to fight me hand-to-hand, which they say they will not carry to him. I think that if my brother kings would lend me men so that Cæsar should know we have an army too numerous for him to overcome, then we might have peace certainly."

He sat down again and threw one long leg over the other, leaning back to study the faces opposite. But Tros noticed that his wrist was trembling. There was an explosion coming.

Gwenwynwyn, safe at the prelate's right hand, stirred the danger mischievously, speaking in a voice as gentle as a child's.

"If we should send men, then we would have none to defend us if the Lord Caswallon should try himself to conquer Britain."

The explosion came.

"Send none!" Caswallon answered, leaping up. "I want no weaklings! You have no men strong enough to march the distance! Let them wait there in the west until Cæsar comes and carries them to Rome in chains! I will be glad to see it!" He paused because the old druid checked him. "Lord Druid, may I speak? I will state this question plainly. No, I care nothing about the Lord Gwenwynwyn. Let the Romans have him and his people. I will say no more about him."

"Speak courteously," Taliesan commanded.

"Brother of gods, I speak in reverence," Caswallon answered. He stood with bowed head, then looked up slowly. "You have said it is not wise to resist the Romans. But I am the one who must feel their heel first. I am a king and I must aid my people. I am willing. Cæsar has sent ambassadors. They offer me Cæsar's friendship. They offer to make me king not only of a part of Britain, but of all of it."

"There! There!" Gwenwynwyn interrupted. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell you?"

"Peace! The Lord Caswallon speaks," said Taliesan. He appeared unmoved, but he was almost supernaturally calm.

"Son of the Eternal Sun, I speak with reverence, but in despair. What I must suffer, let these suffer with me! I will do more than yield to Cæsar. I will say to his ambassadors that he should come soon, swiftly."

"No! No! No!"

Four kings were on their feet, gesturing indignantly, but they sat down when Taliesan motioned.

"There," Gwenwynwyn interjected, suavely as a critic at a singing competition. "He is Cæsar's friend. I said so."

And Caswallon thundered at him—

"If I must be Cæsar's friend to save the holy druids, then I will be!"

Gwanar, king of the Iceni, rose at that.

"Watch me then! See how soon I will overrun your country! I will burn Verulam and Lunden before ever you let Cæsar come!"

"Who threatens? I will have no threats here!" Taliesan exclaimed in a voice that brought utter silence. For a minute there was no sound except heavy breathing and the crack of burnt wood falling on the hearth. Then he nodded to Caswallon to continue speaking, though he looked too tired to hear him.

"Lord Druid, I have done with threats. I speak of what is. Let the outcome rest with thee. Rule thou my brother kings. To-morrow I will answer Marius, the Roman, and he shall say to Cæsar one of two things. Either he shall say, 'Come, Caswallon welcomes you!' or he shall say 'Caswallon and his brother kings have raised ten thousand men and will resist invasion!' That is my last word. I speak with reverence."

He sat down. Tros nodded. But a great sigh came from the white-haired Taliesan. Then a stillness fell, in which the cracking of the burning logs was like the snapping of loud whips. Red firelight fell on a dozen spell-bound faces, bearded and unbearded alternating. The old Lord Druid's white hands gripped the throne-arms. It was his turn next to speak. He and none other could control those kings. In his hands lay the issue, peace or war.

They waited, hardly breathing. The firelight flickered. A big log cracked, and fell among the crimson coals, tossing a burst of sparks.

"He sleeps," said a druid, leaning forward, holding up a finger.

But the old Lord Druid stirred. Three times his lips moved, but no sound came. Three times he grew rigid and relaxed, all eyes observing. Then his head fell forward on his breast and both hands slipped on to his lap.

"He is weary. He sleeps," said the druid again, but five kings stared with frozen faces and none else said a word.

Tros moved from his place on tiptoe, passing through the shadows behind the chairs, and leaned over the throne-back from behind. None breathed. There was no sound other than the cracking sparks. Then Tros's awed voice broke hoarsely on the stillness:

"He is dead!"

CHAPTER XLV

EOUGH, THE SORCERER

So ye accuse me? Ye say I stand between Eternity and treason. A sorcerer lives, ye say, and the responsibility is mine. Mine be it.

When was it that ye gave comfort to the people who are not as ye are? But ye bid me to slay their comforter.

Him ye call a sorcerer, and me ye call a druid. They, though, call him their prophet, and of me they speak fearfully, in doubt and mistrust of the grandeur in which ye clothe my office.

In that their sorcerer brought them comfort that ye would not, and I could not give them, he is greater than I and more noble than you. Ye who bid me to slay him because he betrays the Ancient Wisdom, have ye taught them any wisdom?

When did Wisdom ever rob the wretched of their hope and faith, in order that intolerance might smell more rotten in the nostrils of Eternal Mercy?

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

A druid, face whiter than his robe, took Tros's sleeve, drew him into shadow behind the semicircle of chairs and faced him, his hand on Tros's forearm trembling.

"Dead!" he said. "Do you know what that means?"

"It means war," Tros answered in a growling undertone.

"Gone! The last of the Great Druids! None to replace Taliesan! Go you"—he took Tros feverishly by the shoulder—"go you to the dining-hall. Keep silence. See that the kings' followers suspect nothing until we decide what shall be told, and when and how."

"Another could do that better than I," Tros objected. "The Lord Caswallon—"

The druid gestured with his head toward the firelight where five kings knelt. That, plainly, was a family affair. Decency forbade intrusion. Tros tiptoed to his chair, picked up his sword, buckled it with a shake of the hips and shoulders. Then, not glancing once behind him, he tiptoed to the door, unlocked it and passed out into darkness.

There was a passage twenty feet long, with a door at the farther end. He had time and opportunity to gather all his wits.

So when he emerged on to the dais in the dining-hall he had managed to assume that carriage of the loins and shoulders of a man who has accomplished, who awaits but the announcement of success. It was a true stage entrance that he made, into the fire and sconce-light. Babbling of tongues ceased. All eyes turned toward him. A minstrel, strumming wandering airs, muted a chord with the flat of his hand.

"Noblemen," said Tros, and his voice was confident, "I beg leave to enjoy your company. The chief druids and your kings confer about an offer I have made them."

His words fell flat. He knew why. He had come forth from the conference unattended, which was such an unheard-of thing in that land of ceremonious hospitality that it conveyed an impression of something being wrong. Before any one could question him, he had forestalled the question, head to one side, grinning:

"Your kings would let none leave the room with me, lest I persuade him while their backs are turned! Shall I try my eloquence meanwhile on your good company? Or have you better entertainment?"

They had been growing rather bored with their own expedients for keeping out of mischief. The druids appeared to have received strict orders to keep them sober, so the mead, good though it was, came slowly up the cellar stairs in parsimonious instalments.

Some of them were playing games with knucklebones across the table. Others had been half asleep when Tros came in. All roared to him for a story. Druids, calm-eyed and incurious, as much at a loss as priests in general are to entertain men who would rather be elsewhere or else drinking themselves quarrelsome, added their voice to the chorus. Tros spread his legs, and began without more ado:

"I wager you have never heard of Troy."

And he began to tell them that tale, alchemy of will recoining Greek hexameters into the prose of Gaul while he stood there and kept tragedy at bay. He concentrated all his intellect, his whole genius. And he began by picturing the fair-haired Helen for them as a British woman, whom each man present might have known and loved.

No question that he held them. From the moment that he spoke of Helen, blue-eyed, with the spun-gold tresses and the smile like rosy morning on a white-capped sea, he had them by the heartstrings and imaginations. All he needed then was music, and a minstrel came unasked to sit on the floor of the dais, eyes fixed on Tros's lips, and pluck suggestive harp-strings that began to change the prose into a chant until Tros was singing, almost before he was aware of it.

But he had not sung further than the rape of Helen—she had not reached Troy—when a horn blown down the night wind, outside the building and beyond the gate, brought every man in the room upstanding. There came a clamor on the great gate bell. Men's voices raised in anger, fear, haste, panic or some such emotion. The rattle of bronze and squeak of an opening gate. Then cantering horse hoofs and a thunder on the hospice door.

None spoke. Men looked to their arms that stood in rows against the long wall opposite the hearth where a druid stood on guard, his hand raised. None beneath the rank of king might wear his sword in that place, and none dared disobey the druid. Four druids hurried to the door; the rest dispersed themselves about the room, ready to check too headlong curiosity.

The thundering ceased, and on a blast of wintry air that sent the smoke billowing from the hearth, five Britons burst into the room at the heels of a man who was neither Briton nor yet Northman, but half of both. They shouted for the Lord Caswallon, but he cried, "Tros! The Lord Tros!" with a parched throat, and there was frozen slobber on his beard. He staggered, lurched into the room, blinded by the firelight. Tros leaped from the dais and in six strides had him by the shoulders.

"Now then, Skell, what is it?"

Skell could not speak. Tros shook him, but the words cracked in his throat. It was the five who followed Skell, who broke the news:

"The Lady Fflur—raped—gone, the Romans have her!"

Turmoil! Such a roar as goes up when the battle ranks engage. Tros seized a half-filled mug of mead and thrust the rim of it between Skell's teeth, bending his head back by the hair, holding his shoulders in the hollow of his left arm. Skell swallowed half-a-dozen gulps, spat, broke his own news:

"Helma! The Lady Helma! Gone! The Romans have her!" Suddenly his own fear for himself came uppermost. "Lord Tros, not my doing! No, no! Not I! Skell was faithful!"

He vomited the mead on to the floor. Tros gave him more of it.

"Now speak," he said, "for this time I believe you."

There was too much stark fear in the eyes of Skell for anything but naked tragedy to lie behind it. Never a man in that emotion thought of coining lies. Truth he might not tell, but it would be the truth as he conceived it.

"Speak!" Tros said again, and shook him, but Skell was losing consciousness.

His eyes were glazing with the film that comes of uttermost exhaustion. Hands pawed feebly at the air, knees doubled under him, and what few words he murmured died in the babel of hoarse British shouting before they reached Tros's ear.

And then Caswallon appeared, pale as a ghost from a tomb, the woad-blue patterns on his neck and forearms standing out like fretwork, back to the door to keep the other kings from bursting through, his eyes ablaze with horror.

"Hold!" he thundered in his line o' battle voice that crashed among the ceiling beams.

And there was silence for the space of ten breaths. Then the hoarse voice of one of the five messengers:

"The Lady Fflur, gone, seized on her way to Merrow--Romans!"

There was thumping on the door behind Caswallon, but his hand was on the bronze latch and there were no four kings in Britain who could break his finger hold.

"Tros!" he said.

"Aye," Tros answered, "they have Helma too."

The blood crept back into Caswallon's face until the veins of his neck swelled and his cheeks flushed.

"Britons!" he said. "The great Taliesan is dead. He died with the word Romans on his lips!"

He let the latch go, striding forward to the dais edge, and four kings came in a hurry through the door behind him, each as phantom-pale as he had been. They were in time to listen, that was all. Caswallon had the ears of that assembly.

"Sons of Britain!" he began. "Will you endure that Romans send ambassadors to me to blandish us with words and seize my wife, a king's wife, while my back is turned in conference with holy druids?"

There began a clatter of swords and swordbelts as the druid by the wall gave every applicant his weapon. Small risk of a quarrel now between the five kings' followers, and a chance, a hope at any rate, that they would cut their visit short on receipt of that emphatic hint. The laws of hospitality were adamant. Not even druids could have asked them to depart.

"Britons!" Caswallon thundered. "What would you think of a king who should submit to this indignity! This outrage! Rot me the king who would endure the hundredth part of it! I lead against the Romans! Who comes?"

They roared and, breaking the druidic rule, drew swords, stamping their right feet until the floor shook and the ceiling beams were thunderous with tumult.

"Britons!" yelled Caswallon. "The Lord Taliesan, the son of Dragons, brother of the gods, is dead!"

Silence again, save only the murmur of awe-struck druids passing somebody's commands in undertones. Caswallon dropped his voice to a sepulchral note.

"These four, my brother kings, will bear me witness that the great Lord Druid died in conference, his whole attention strained to keeping peace with Rome! The gods have summoned him. He died, the word unspoken. There is none now to advise us how the gods would rede this riddle. There never was in our day one but that grand Lord Druid, whom we loved, who could have told us how to tolerate this outrage without losing manhood. Are we men?"

He paused.

"I will speak no word of vengeance in this holy place, this house where my father lived, where I was born, that I gave to the great Lord Druid. But I speak of manhood, that he praised this night to all of you. The word he left unspoken, speak ye! The riddle that he died before he answered, answer ye! Is it peace or war with Rome?"

They drew their swords again. Eyes met. There was a long breath and a thunderous answer:

"War!"

"War be it!" said Caswallon, turning to the four kings who had had no say at all in that decision. He offered to embrace them, and the first two kissed him with good grace. Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici, third in line, however, stepped back and his silky voice sweetened the silence.

"A minute. Whose wife is missing? My wife keeps her household modestly where I left her in Glamorgan."

Caswallon checked him with a gesture that looked like a blow controlled in time.

"No arguments!" he said. "Gwenwynwyn, lord of the Ordovici, you and your followers may go home!"

"Indeed, and we do!" Gwenwynwyn answered. "My brother kings bear witness that the great Lord Druid spoke of peace. He died, having spoken of nothing else than peace. He did not speak of hunting other men's stray wives."

Gwanar, king of the Iceni, stepped between the two and threw an arm around Caswallon's shoulder.

"The Lady Fflur is worth a thousand men and fifteen hundred horses!" he said boldly. "So they shall go with you to Gaul if need be."

"That is a new way to sell horses," Gwenwynwyn said in an aside that could be heard throughout the room.

"Horses?" Tros exploded. He had left Skell in the hands of the druids who knelt on the floor beside him, administering some kind of drug. Caswallon's messengers were talking to excited groups.

"Who has ships? My man Skell says the Lady Fflur, my wife and seven slave-women, along with eight or ten of their escort, were seized on their way to Merrow by a party of Romans dressed like Gauls. Marius and Galba—"

"Who went in pursuit?" Caswallon interrupted.

"Skell says half the countryside."

Caswallon barked for his own five messengers. They left the groups and came to stand in line before him.

"Sieves!" he said, scowling "Tosspots! Bottomless buckets of gossip!"

He forgot that he had given them no opportunity to tell their tale to him direct. Now they confirmed what Tros said, adding:

"Pursuit started late. One of the slave-women gave the Romans the slip and made her way to a farmhouse. A man put her on horseback, and they killed both horses under them. He rode to Lunden, she to the shipyard. Sigurdsen found a horse for Skell and sent him hotfoot, because of all in the shipyard only Skell knew the way to Verulam. We overhauled Skell not a mile from here."

"One more such service, and I set Skell free!" Tros muttered.

"Lord Caswallon, come and look at the horses if you think we wasted time," urged one of the messengers.

"Horses? Ships!" Tros exploded again. "That honest Marius had this planned from the beginning! I will wager all my shipyard to a broken wheel that the Romans had a fast ship waiting in the port of Hythe. The Northmen burned Hythe. There would be no Britons there. They can't rebuild the place before spring."

"No," said a messenger. "The slave-girl told us they were headed eastward, toward Thanet, maybe."

"Quick, then!" Tros was thinking instantly in terms of wind and tides. "To the south coast with a hundred men! Take ships and head them off. Get between them and Gaul!"

"No ships," Caswallon answered with a gloomy shoulder shrug.

"All hauled out for the winter, cordage laid away. My Lunden men may overtake them before they reach Thanet," he added, trying to speak hopefully.

"Not they!" Tros answered. "The Romans are good on land; they lay all plans carefully. It is only at sea they are duffers. It might take them a week to reach Gaul from Thanet unless the wind backs to the northeast."

"Which it will," Caswallon said.

"Which it will," said Gwanar, king of the Iceni.

Tros knew they spoke the truth. The marvel was that a Roman ship should have reached Thanet in winter time in the teeth of the prevailing northeast gales. Yet there could be no other possible solution of the riddle. Neither Marius nor Galba would have taken flight unless a ship were waiting to carry them back to Gaul. It would have been absolute madness to carry off Fflur and Helma unless they could convey them out of reach. Fflur's and Helma's value would be as hostages in Cæsar's camp.

"We waste time," Caswallon said. "Who comes? Gwanar"—he turned and looked into the eyes of him of the Iceni—"will you send me a thousand men?"

Gwanar nodded.

"You must feed them," he answered.

Tros, hands behind him, grinding his teeth savagely, strode up and down the dais. Ship not yet half-built, young wife in Cæsar's hands, friendship to Caswallon pledged, the bireme he had won from Cæsar three parts broken up, all useless, and no British ships available or even seaworthy, supposing they could be fitted out within a week or a month or three months. A fine predicament.

"Fool that I was to take a woman to myself!" he muttered, knowing, nonetheless, that he loved Helma and would bring her back from Gaul or perish trying. He recalled his father's words:

"A woman is experience, a man's friend insofar that she provides experience. Nevertheless, my son, experience is warfare between soul and circumstance. The less a man is tangled up with circumstance, the more he is his own master and free to enlarge horizons."

Tros knew he was not his own master that hour and it fretted him more than did the thought of being tricked by Cæsar's jackals, Marius and Galba. He felt like a man in chains. Had only Fflur been carried off, he could have abandoned his own plans cheerfully and have thrown his whole strength and resources into an effort to help Caswallon. That would have been sacrifice for friendship's sake, a satisfying, splendid course, whatever came of it. But now he must abandon all plans and unite his efforts to Caswallon's for his own sake, for his own pride.

The love he had begun to feel for Helma he recognized as something he might not repudiate and might not subordinate to other considerations. So long as she was faithful to himself, he had to set her first in his appalling host of obligations.

Suddenly he turned and took Caswallon by the shoulder.

"Friend o' mine," he said, "will you guard my back if I pluck these chestnuts from the fire for both of us? Lud rot these other kings! They stink of jealousy! Gather your thousand men, ten thousand, any number. But guard my shipyard while I out-speed Cæsar! Should I fail, you will have the men to follow up with, though the gods alone know how you will ever carry them to Gaul! Speed is the first consideration, speed the second, speed the last! Will you trust me?"

"As for that, I have ever trusted you. Let us go. We will talk on the way," Caswallon answered.

But that was Britain. They could not take Roman leave as Marius had done. There were farewells, ceremonious and long-drawn blessings from the druids, and a midnight invocation to the gods who had summoned the great Taliesan at last to impoverish men's counsels and enrich their own.

"Him whom we revered, treat ye, O Powers of the light that burns in darkness, with all honor and all gentleness. As he poured wisdom on us, pour ye your love on him."

Then away under the frosty stars, Caswallon driving faster than his gentlemen-at-arms could ride and Tros beside him huddled against the wind that nipped face, feet and hands, Caswallon tossing down to Tros disjointed scraps of conversation.

"None to replace Fflur, and Cæsar knows it!"

Then presently:

"None to replace Taliesan. The gods know that!"

Silence, and after a while:

"Taliesan could have solved it. *Hi-yeh! Hup!* Lud love 'em, but the druids keep fat horses! We'd have done better with my own tired team."

Silence again, the trees like phantoms flitting by, steel stars overhead, no clouds, but a wind that cut like a whiplash. Then:

"I would have listened to Taliesan. If he had answered one word. But he didn't, and now Cæsar's answer comes. War! So be it."

He made harsh noises with his teeth that sent the horses headlong, faster than ever. The din of the escort galloping behind grew more remote. Tros beat his fingers on the wooden rail that topped the basketwork. Presently Caswallon again:

"These horses are like snails! And Fflur in the hands of Marius! Will he dare insult her? Will he dare—"

Noises in his teeth; then whip and a furious charge at a watercourse where the cat's ice crackled at the stream's edge and the water raced among the singing stones. A bump that made Tros's spine tingle and his teeth snap, a shout, ice-cold spray that froze on the face and on the chariot side, a swift succession of swaying jerks, and they were up the far bank, Caswallon easing the team to a canter to let them recover wind. Then:

"No chance of learning anything this side of Lunden unless they sent a messenger to meet us. Left or right, nobody'd know anything."

"Yes," said Tros.

"Who?"

"Eough."

"The sorcerer? Lud save us, Tros! From Taliesan's death chamber to the charcoal-burner's wizard? What next?"

"Any lee in a gale!" Tros answered. "Eough can help us. I sent him a full firkin of new cod's oil less than three days gone. Turn out when you come to the track that leads to Eough's place."

"We passed it long ago."

"No lies to me, Caswallon! You and I are too good friends, and you too much the man for that game! Turn out on the road to Eough's. I'll swallow the blame for sorcery, which frets me not at all. Good Taliesan is gone. We must make the best of evil Eough."

"A mad night! Lud's blood, a mad night!" Caswallon muttered.

But when they reached the mound-encircled roadhouse where the teams were changed he sent all of his escort except Orwic ahead of him along the road to Lunden, giving no excuse except that they should gather news and have it ready for him against his coming. Tros pulled Skell down from behind a Briton's saddle and ordered him into the chariot.

"Skell knows more than he has told," he muttered, stamping his feet to warm them.

"Lud's liver! What would my men say if they knew I rode to Eough's on such a night!" Caswallon remarked, examining the fresh team, tightening a bridle. "Orwic, druid's curses on you if you tell what you shall see to-night!"

But Orwic laughed. His youngsters' generation lacked a good deal of its elders' piety.

"I am all for seeing sights," he answered, mounting a ramping stallion that swerved away from him. But he was in the saddle quicker than the squealing brute could move. "Lead on. This is cold work, waiting."

For about three-quarters of an hour they followed in the escort's track, then suddenly Caswallon swung the team around a clump of oaks and drove full gallop into the gloom of a sighing forest. No stars now. There was hardly a glimpse of sky between the swaying treetops. Only a gloom that even Tros's eyes hardly penetrated—black, solid night on either hand, that breathed of dry leaves. Ahead, a winding trail that took the whole of Caswallon's woodcraft and all his horsemanship to follow. He drove headlong, leaning forward, crying to the horses.

Once when he pulled up sharp at a fallen tree before he plied the whip and jumped it, Orwic, thundering behind, reined in the red stallion with forefeet over Tros's head. Once they plunged into an icy marsh, and Orwic's stallion had to be hitched to help the struggling team toward a bed of rushes, whence they staggered back to firm ground. And once both horses fell in a frantic heap on the ice at the edge of a watercourse. The twisted harness had to be untangled in the dark, both horses kicking blindly and Caswallon laughing nervously as he hove them to their feet by main force.

"Not so bad," he commented. "I had expected worse than this!"

Then on again, full pelt beside the brook where pollard willows looked like goblins in the wan gloom and the rabbit holes, between the patches of refrozen snow, were a maze of unseen danger underfoot.

Both chariot horses limped when Caswallon reined at last before a thatched mud hovel and Orwic, leaning from the saddle, thundered with his spear butt on the oaken door. Caswallon got down, feeling the horses' forelegs, and there was a long wait, no sound from within the hut, until Orwic wheeled his stallion away and, retreating twenty or thirty yards made ready to charge and smash the door to splinters. It was then that a voice from an oak tree called to them.

"What damage have I done you? Why break my house?"

It was a voice as clear and ringing as a young man's, with a note of anger in it and no reverence. Orwic rode under the tree and poked among the branches with his spear-point.

"Come down, and tell us where to find Eough!" he shouted.

"I can tell you that without coming down, and you can't reach me with the spear!" the voice retorted. "Caswallon, the king, Tros the ship-builder, and Orwic, the coxcomb! Come from seeing the Great Druid die! Blind as bats in daylight, all of you! I know! I watched the heavens from a treetop."

"Come down!" commanded Orwic.

"Get an ax. Cut down the tree!" Caswallon ordered, blanketing the horses. That would have been real generalship, except for one or two facts. The tree, for instance, was eight or nine feet thick, and there was no ax.

"Come down, Eough, or I will send Skell up after you!" said Tros.

"I am not afraid of Skell, who is afraid of me!" the voice retorted.

"Oh, very well," said Tros, and began to pull his cloak off. "I'll come!"

"I can jump like a squirrel from tree to tree. What do you want? Have you brought some fish oil? Charcoal for fish, dung for oil, nothing for nothing! Caswallon is a king. People who trust kings deserve to be tricked!"

"My promise."

"Promise of Tros the ship-builder? Fish-Oil Tros. Smoked-Herring Tros. Cod's-Liver Tros. Horse-Dung Tros. Very well, I'm coming."

He came with so little noise and on the far side of the tree that he was on the ground before they were aware of it, a dwarf in a jelly-bag cap and leather jerkin, with a beard to his middle and long hair over his shoulders; in all respects a giant in miniature —heavy, strong, athletically shaped, walking toward them as if he owned the forest. The horses shied, but not at him. When he whistled, a wolf came and fawned against his legs.

He made no remark, but went to the back of the hut and entered through a window. Presently, from within, he opened the door and stood there with a newly lighted fire blazing on the hearth behind him. Smoke filled the room, not finding its way out yet through the square hole in the thatch. With smoke and fire behind him, he looked like a gnome from the infernal regions. Caswallon made motions with his right hand and muttered invocations to the Lords of Light.

"Kings who enter here must bow their heads!" said Eough. He laughed, and slapped the arch of the low door. "High enough for me! You big proud fellows stoop, stoop all of ye! Skell, the squealer, Skell, the slave, Skell, the pirate's bastard! Leave Skell to watch the horses. Lame horses, I must mend their legs. Come on in. What are you waiting for? Caswallon, Caswallon, the king is afraid! So would I be afraid if I hadn't the given word of Fish-Oil Tros. Come in."

He turned his back on them, and they entered one by one into a dingy cabin, marvelously clean but heaped with odds and ends. Bags, hanging from the roof-beams, bulged with mysterious contents and had to be dodged, although Eough's head missed them comfortably. He set three stools before the fire, signed to his visitors to sit down and himself stood with his back to the wall in the one place where the smoke did not curl in stinging clouds.

He was apple-cheeked, and the cheeks were bright red, as red as his cap, from exercise in the frosty night. Crowsfeet at the corners of his eyes betrayed age, but he looked otherwise not older than Caswallon, until he showed his hands, that were an old man's, knotted with protruding knuckle-bones. His bare legs, strong as oak boughs and as brown as oak tan, had not a hair on them.

"Now," he said, "Taliesan is dead, and so you come to me. I could have told you Taliesan would die. His time had come. I was up in the treetop watching the conjunction of the stars. Kings and fools don't understand such simple mysteries."

"What else did the stars tell you?" Tros asked, pointing at him with his long, sheathed sword.

"Put that thing down!" He whistled the wolf and it came lip-lifted, snarling. "You didn't come to ask me about stars or about Taliesan, who was a good friend of mine, although you, you fools, call me a sorcerer. If it hadn't been for Taliesan your pack of hunting, drinking, swaggering madmen would have tried to kill me long ago, but Taliesan knew the charcoal-burners must have a wise man to guide them. Who will protect me now Taliesan has gone? You?" he asked, pointing a crooked finger at Caswallon.

"Come to the point!" said Orwic, grinning, touching the dwarf's breast with the point of the long spear. "Tros thinks you can tell him something. Tell it!"

"You will protect me?"

"I have given you dried fish and fish oil, lots of it," said Tros. "I want sulphur to-night."

"You shall have it."

"It was you who told me, a month ago, which way two of my runaway slaves had gone. Tell me now where the Lady Fflur is, and my wife Helma."

"The Romans have them. Any fool could know that."

"Where?"

But Eough shook his head.

"I don't trust kings."

Tros looked at Caswallon, who screwed up his face in unconcealed disgust. He was an easy-going king, but had his prejudices.

"He should have been roasted long ago," he remarked, and then spat in the fire.

"Nothing for nothing," Tros answered. "Give him your protection."

Caswallon laid his face between his hands, sighed and looked up again.

"I gave Marius protection," he said gloomily. "We waste time. What can Eough say? Oh well, what does it matter? One rascal more or less, Lud's mud! This is a mad night! Speak," he said, frowning at the dwarf. "I protect you in coming and going, in house and holding, so you break no common law."

"I witness!" Tros exclaimed.

"I witness!" echoed Orwic. Orwic grinned, he was enjoying it.

The expression of Eough's face hardly changed, although his eyes seemed to hint at laughter.

"Sorcery is against your common law, and you call me a sorcerer," he answered. "If I tell you what I know, you will have me burned, so I will tell you what the charcoal-burners told me. That is not sorcery, is it? Are they sorcerers?"

"Speak!" Caswallon exploded irritably. "I protect you if you speak, not otherwise. Have you the spear ready, Orwic?"

Before Orwic could answer or move, the dwarf had sprung for the small, square window and had vanished through it.

"I don't trust kings! I will tell Tros what I know. Let him come out here," he called from outer darkness.

So Tros gathered the cloak around him and strode out into the night, stumbling over tree roots, feeling his way clumsily, his eyes bewildered by the darkness after firelight. The dwarf took him by the hand and pulled him in great haste, warning him when to duck the branches, until they reached a rock and a tangle of brambles that protruded through frozen snow.

Down under the rock they went into a cavern that reeked of fish, and there they sat on empty barrels when Eough had lighted and trimmed a lamp wick, Tros cursing the cold and the stench, while his eyes tried to pierce the shadows in search of the sulphur his heart desired.

"Now," he said, when the dwarf climbed a barrel and faced him, "call it sorcery or call it charcoal-burners' gossip, but tell me what you know about the Lady Fflur and my wife."

"Why not call it truth?" the dwarf suggested. "Don't you propose to believe me?"

"Truth then. Go ahead, but tell it."

"Weeks, weeks, weeks, weeks, weeks—five weeks. Three Romans. Two-and-twenty men from Murchan, king of Gwasgwyn.* A small ship at the south end of the Isle of Thanet. Gauls and Romans all dressed alike, Romans pretending to be Gauls. Can't fool me, though.

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* The modern Gascony.

Can't fool the charcoal-burners. Two-score Gauls and Romans waiting in the ship. Watch changed every hour or two. Five-and-twenty, getting very hungry, lurking on the downs by Merrow Pool, stealing sheep. Much trouble with the sheep-dogs. Frightening the shepherds off with sheets tied to a pole. Marius the Roman's barber staying at the gatehouse by Lud's Bridge; one Gaul brings him messages; he tells Marius when he shaves him in the morning. The king's wife, your wife, eight slave-women, two other women, Marius, Galba, charioteers and ten-man escort—all off to the king's farm near by Merrow. Simple enough. Ship waiting, not too far. Charioteers dead. Four escort dead. Others tied, taken along. All worth money over there in Gaul."

"Has the ship gone?" Tros demanded.

"Wind's good," Eough suggested, and Tros swore savagely. The wind had backed to the northeast two or three hours ago. It would be blowing a three-reef gale by morning.

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" Tros asked him.

"Why should I?" Eough retorted, and Tros nodded grimly.

There had been no reason why an outlawed man should run with information to a king who only tolerated him because the druids had suggested tolerance. There was no real reason why he himself should expect favors from the dwarf. Yet they had struck up friendship on a fish-oil bargain basis, and he had learned to value the dwarf's judgment as well as his knowledge of alchemy and an almost superhuman skill in sifting news.

"You and I have been good friends," he said, watching the dwarf's eyes by the light of the flickering wick.

"Nothing for nothing!" the dwarf retorted, quoting him against himself.

He was reading Tros's eyes quite as sharply as Tros could read his.

"Certainly," said Tros, "but there are some things a man can't pay for in one life."

"Oh, you know that?" said the dwarf. "Where did you learn wisdom?"

"I am on my way to Gaul to recover my wife and the Lady Fflur from Cæsar's hands," said Tros. "Will you come with me and bring about fifty charcoal-burners?"

"Oh!" the dwarf exploded. "Oh! Who ever heard the like of that!"

He rolled sidewise off the barrel in a paroxysm of almost inaudible laughter.

Suddenly he rested his chin on the barrel and peered into Tros's eyes.

"Charcoal-burners! Me! What impudence! Who ever heard the like of it! Why yes, we'll come!"

"I will pay you."

"Na-na-nah! No bargains!" said the dwarf, pointing his crooked finger at Tros's face. "You go for what you want. I go for what I want. You find the ship and the food. I find the charcoal-burners."

Tros began to hesitate. The dwarf's consent was too quick not to imply trickery. His unwillingness to stipulate for payment, too, was so unlike his usual method as to arouse suspicion that he had some method in mind of paying himself handsomely. But outside Caswallon and Orwic were filling the night with howls and shouts to Tros to hurry.

"Can I bring a hundred men and all their women?" the dwarf asked.

"Bring as many as I can crowd into the longship, not one more," Tros answered. "Bring them to the shipyard now. No waiting. I won't wait one tide for them. And bring sulphur, all you have."

"Tros! Tros! Tro-o-os! Where are you, Tros!"

Tros found his way out of the cave, but the dwarf lingered. The wolf came and clicked jaws a yard behind Tros's heels as he followed the sound of the voices. Caswallon and Orwic had wandered away from the cabin in search of him. They crashed among brambles and snow-covered roots, cursing Eough and sorcery and all that forest.

When Tros found them the three together found their way back to the chariot more by the sound of Skell's voice than by eyesight. Eough—speaking in grunts to Skell—was on his knees in front of the horses, rubbing something on their legs that stank like rotten fish but, judging from the way they held their ears, appeared already to have eased them. It might have been sulphur and fish oil and something else, a smell Tros did not recognize.

"A mad night and a mad waste of time!" Caswallon snorted.

For a minute Tros did not answer. He was figuring in terms of ebb and flow.

"Two tides and we are on our way to Gaul, that is, if you dare!" he said at last.

"After such a night as this, I dare all hell!" Caswallon growled.

CHAPTER XLVI

ROUGH APPLIES ALCHEMY

Ye bring sacrifices and pray for a miracle to save you from the consequences of your greed and evil-doing. But ye call him an outlaw, a devil, a sorcerer, the enemy of Light, who taketh in humility what is and therewith doeth what ye lack the manhood to attempt.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

BEACONS, warning every man of fighting age to rally toward Lunden, blazed on hilltops, growing pale against the dawn as they neared the shipyard, where Caswallon set Tros down. He and Skell walked the last quarter-mile of the distance.

"You are half a free man," Tros remarked to him. "One more such service, and I will try to forget old treacheries. Nevertheless, you have not yet told the whole of it. I hate a man who goes half distances, brave one minute, afraid for his skin the next. You have until we reach the shipyard to discover to me whether you are my man, truly, or a mere scared, lower benchman, straining at the oar for better food and less whip. Mind you, I can smell a lie three leagues away!"

Skell eyed him sidewise as Tros, pretending not to see, was perfectly aware.

"Lord Tros," he said awkwardly, his breath coming in startled puffs on the frosty air, "a slave who was born free must make the most of any chance to bargain for his freedom back again."

Tros spun on his heel and shoved him by the shoulders so that they faced each other.

"You poor, miserable bastard, I will make no bargains!" he retorted. "Master and slave, druid and layman, king and subject, it is even so aboard ship. If a captain lets a crew drive bargains, then the crew is without a captain, slave without a master! Your duty is to me. My duty to use judgment. I will do mine. Do you yours or suffer for it!"

Still Skell hesitated. Mightily he feared Tros. More than he had ever loved a human being, almost, that is, he felt affection for him. But he had too long trafficked in treachery, too highly valued his own volatile adroitness to surrender an advantage without stipulations.

"You said half free?" he asked. "I served you well to-night. I nearly killed myself."

"Maybe better dead than half dead!" Tros retorted, laying a hand on his sword-hilt. "Mine to give, and mine to take away! You are no longer half free! Now speak. Say what you know."

Skell sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "There is not much satisfaction in serving a man who—"

"There is satisfaction to me in being served well!" Tros interrupted, cutting him short. "There is none in being played with fast and loose! You have while I count ten."

Skell's eyes betrayed that he did not know what would happen when the count of ten was finished. It was what he did not know that conquered him. Given a certainty, his mind would have started instantly devising schemes to take advantage of it. He had known Tros long enough to know he would not kill a man merely for disobedience, but he also knew he was a man of swift expedients.

"I was afraid to tell you," he stammered. "You have accused me before this of treachery. You might do it again. I asked Eough. He said to go ahead and tell you. So I made up my mind to bargain for my freedom."

Tros was silent, stern-lipped.

"It was Galba"—Tros grinned savagely—"Galba in the shipyard, under the lee of the sawing shed, hinted there might be an incident, and opportunity thereafter for a man of tact to do himself some good. He said if a certain person should be missing, I would do well afterward to speak to you about it. He said I should tell you then that you can have the person back by coming to Gaul and making profitable terms with Cæsar."

"Did he name the person who might disappear?" Tros demanded.

"No."

"When did this conversation take place?"

"In the afternoon two days before you left for Verulam. One day after it was known that you would go to Verulam."

"And you, you dog! You never thought of warning me?"

They were not far from the shipyard. Tros drew a silver whistle from his breast and blew three peculiar, sharp blasts on it. There was instant noise and movement. The gate slammed. Conops came running, with two Northmen behind him, all three breathless, slipping and stumbling through the shallow snowdrifts.

"Put Skell in irons!" said Tros. "Fetter him hand and leg. Short rations. Let him have no speech with any one."

They stared, for the news had gone through the shipyard that Skell was lucky to have been chosen midnight messenger. However, they seized him, asked no questions, hurried him away. Tros strode to the gate alone and stood there until Sigurdsen came, still pulling on his clothes.

"Sigurdsen, launch the longship! Don't tell me she's frozen on the mud, I know it! Work her loose! Boil water, soften the mud with hot fish oil, anything. Have her ready for sea to-night! Steady now! Mark this—if you as much as whisper that it can't be done I'll find me a new lieutenant! Put stores aboard for a hundred men for one week. Set fifty Britons at once to spreading pitch on her from stem to stern.

"Fill one of the waterbutts with charcoal. Put aboard twice as much rope as you think we'll need. Take one of the bronze anchors from the new ship and secure it close to the mast where we can use the halyards to get it overboard. Bows and arrows, swords for forty men, shields, axes. Leave the rest to me. Report to me when the ship's afloat."

Tros went in search of the slave-girl who had brought the news. She had heard his whistle and was already cooking breakfast for him, weeping beside the hearth, tears dripping in the sizzling bacon.

"You are free!" Tros informed her by way of greeting. "I will give you the document. Now, now! No slavering! Get up! Put the food on the table and talk while I eat. Stop crying or I won't hire you."

The night's ride had sharpened his appetite. He ate enormously, listening with grunted comments and curt questions to the woman's half hysterical account.

"By the River Wey we waited while they watered the horses. The Lord Galba was amusing the company on the riverbank, singing a song about his own country. But the Lord Marius sat horseback on a high mound, and I saw him take his helmet off and wave it. Then men who looked like Gauls—but some of them shouted in the Roman tongue—came running out of ambush and cut off those of the escort who had not yet crossed the river.

"The Lady Fflur jumped into a chariot, but two men seized the horses' heads, although she beat them with a whip. There was fighting and men slain. The Lady Helma cried to me to hide and then run for help. I jumped into the water where there was ice among the rushes. I couldn't see much. I was half frozen and afraid to move. Two men came and searched for me, talking Roman to each other, but they could not wait long, and presently I saw them ride away eastward, following the others.

"Then I ran until I found a farmhouse where the man said I was a runaway slave and wished to hold me for the reward. But I persuaded him, and he took two horses, setting me on one. So we rode to Lunden, crying alarm to the few whom we met on the way. But they laughed at us, and we had no time to stop and explain. I came straight to Sigurdsen and he sent Skell."

"Well, you are free," said Tros, "and I will hire you for a wage to be the Lady Helma's servant, so that you may earn yourself a dowry and become an honest woman."

He strode out into the shipyard, where all was already bustle and confusion. Shouts and an oily stench from where the longship lay, announced that Sigurdsen had gone to work. There was a crackling of wood under the cauldrons where the Britons were heating pitch, and some of the Northmen were rigging tackles by the waterside and passing ropes to a mooring in mid-river to help launch the longship as soon as the mud was thawed.

Tros visited the biggest store-shed, calling to Conops to come and unlock it, then summoning a dozen Britons to follow him inside. He made them fill one barrel full of the yellowish crystals he had dug from beneath Caswallon's stable. That and twenty of the round lead balls he had made for ammunition for the catapults, he ordered rolled outside into the yard.

"The druids," he said to Conops, "are full of wisdom in the ways of peace. But for making war against Cæsar, with only one ship and a hundred men, sorcery seems better. When Eough comes, let me know."

He was still greatly puzzled about Eough; half feared the dwarf would not come after all, although hitherto he had always kept his promises and had even made the charcoal-burners keep theirs. He wondered why Eough should wish to go to Gaul and take a hundred charcoal-burners with him, women too. It was a mystery, he decided, and it was a part of his philosophy that the mysterious evolves into the beneficial.

He could crowd two hundred into the longship in addition to his Northmen to man the oars and the yards and the braces, although it would be tight quarters. He suspected a hundred woodsmen, used to outlawry and self-concealment, would be better against Cæsar than a thousand of Gwanar's men, provided only he could manage them, which he might do with Eough's help. Whereas, not Gwanar himself, still less Caswallon, would be likely to keep control of a thousand Iceni and perhaps as many Trinobantes, even supposing it were possible to land them on the coast of Gaul.

"Little man," he said to Conops, "I shall need you ten times over. Yet you shall stay here and guard my half-built ship. Ten of those hot stinkballs go with me. Ten are for you to keep. When Eough comes with the sulphur we will mix the charge for them. Roll me out a barrel of that resin. Set it near the other barrel, so. Eough shall appoint you lord high second sorcerer. I give you command over the shipyard, to guard it in my absence. He gives you command over the dark powers of the underworld, in proof of which, when the longship sails, you shall let off one hot stinkball, taking care to keep up-wind of it.

"After that, I think, those Britons I must leave behind will be afraid to disobey you. And there won't come too many visitors to steal the fittings. I will leave you enough money to buy food with, but buy only a little at a time. Buy hand-to-mouth, and let the slaves know you are doing that. So you can refuse to buy at all and they can all go hungry if you have any trouble with them. Glendwyr I will take with me. That hot-blood might kill you otherwise."

Conops grinned sourly. "What have I done that you should leave me?" he demanded.

"You have done well," Tros retorted. "The reward of doing well is a more severe task, always. Attend to this one properly, and I may send you to Cæsar next, lone-handed, to cut his ears off!"

"Master, master! Let that woman Helma go her way!" Conops urged, his one eye gleaming jealously. "You and I are not made for marrying. Let Cæsar have her. No luck, so long as we are tied to a woman's skirt! One trouble on the last one's heels. Follow my way and have a new woman in every port you come to, like a ship tied to a mooring, that can let go when her captain pleases."

He stopped because Tros was grinning at him, more than because Tros's fist was raised. But he ducked the fist, nevertheless.

"If you had two eyes, my little man, I'd knock one out for you!" said Tros.

But though he stooped to pick up a lump of wood and made believe to throw it, Conops stayed within range.

"Master, I'm right and you know it! Look at this now! A wonder ship but half built, and a woman."

Tros hove the lump of wood, purposely missed him by an inch or two, laughed and walked away toward where Sigurdsen was brewing agonizing stenches, scalding the legs of men who did not get out of the way in time and nigh breaking the backs of others who hauled on anchored tackles at the word of command. Tros watched, observed that the pitch was very nearly spread on the ship's undersides from mud to waterline—for that job went swiftly with fifty men—and ordered a sheerlegs carried up, three tree-trunks set up tripod fashion with a great bronze block hung from the summit.

"You'll break her back," warned Sigurdsen. But Tros preferred the risk of that to more delay.

They passed the tackle to a capstan fifty feet away. Twenty men on the capstan put strain on a sling under the ship's bow, easing the ship's weight off the thawed ooze and, at a blow of the whistle, all tackles worked together. The ship did not budge, although dry timbers creaked and a tackle broke with a noise like one of

Tros's new catapults. Sigurdsen assumed a told-you-so expression. But Tros doubled the crew on the sheerlegs, tried again and, at the next attempt, the longship slid into the river.

"Now she will leak like a sieve!" said Sigurdsen. "There's no pitch on her bottom."

"Pitch her inside then! Slap it on thick and throw sawdust on it. We sail to-night."

There were a thousand things to see to, not least the new half-finished ship that must be covered and protected in all ways possible. Tros went up to examine the new deck that Sigurdsen had started laying in his absence, and presently gave an order that nearly broke his heart. He made them bring the newly finished linen sails out of the sailshed and spread them tent-fashion over the ship's gaping waist, with loose boards under them.

"They'll be ruined," he muttered, "ruined!"

But it had to be.

And then Caswallon, fresh from a council meeting, wanting to be comforted.

"Lud rot them! They will offer gold for Fflur. They bid me send a messenger to Cæsar and demand what price he asks, and to tell you to do the same for Helma. My Lundeners will pay Fflur's ransom but not your wife's. Pursuit? Aye, three thousand men turned out, and they've hung a dozen of my shepherds for not reporting that Romans were lurking near Merrow. About a hundred men reached Thanet in time to see the Roman's ship put to sea in a gale. What shall I do, Tros? Lud o' Lunden, what a helpless cockerel a king is, if his men won't fight! Will you take my message to Cæsar for me?"

"No," said Tros, stroking his beard thoughtfully as he leaned back against an oaken prop that supported the great ship's hull. "But if you can send a messenger to Gaul, who will start a rumor that you will sail a week or two from now to have at Cæsar with ten or fifteen thousand men, do that by all means."

Caswallon laid a blue-veined white hand on his shoulder.

"Brother Tros, we must pay Cæsar's price. My council say they will not feed Gwanar's men, nor do they want Iceni quartering themselves in our towns. They offer gold for Fflur's ransom, and beyond that nothing. They loved Taliesan. They are thinking only of his funeral."

"How much do they love you?" Tros inquired.

Caswallon hesitated now to answer that. Tros continued his line of thought:

"If you should be a prisoner in Gaul or should be slain in Gaul, how deeply would it stir them?"

"I don't know," Caswallon answered. "But I think that in the spring they might send an expedition."

Tros laughed. "Buy back your wife from Cæsar with your subjects' money? If Cæsar would sell, which I doubt, though he loves gold. Sail with me, man! I sail to-night. Either I win back Fflur and Helma or I die."

Caswallon's eyes gleamed.

"My son is too young to act as regent," he said, "but my cousin Orwic—"

"To-night's tide!" Tros said with deliberate emphasis. "Get that messenger to Gaul if you can do it. Have him say that every fishing ship in Britain is being prepared to go to sea."

Caswallon drove away for further wrangling with his council, promising, if nothing else, to send that messenger. Tros went on working like Force incarnate to make the shipyard safe, and to provide sufficient plain, hard labor to keep his Britons out of mischief during his absence. He did not much care whether Caswallon should elect to come with him or not.

It was nearly nightfall when at last Eough came. It was a strange procession that he led. Two hundred men and women, fifty children, clothed in skins, all carrying wicker baskets in which their miserably insufficient household goods were packed, trailed behind Eough like a flexible long monster snaking through the shadows. Those in front carried bags of sulphur in addition to their baskets. All, even the women and children, had rough knives. They reeked of fish oil, as if they had used up all Eough's treasure on their skins before they came away. Eough's wolf ran in and out among their legs like a shuttle weaving an interminable pattern.

Tros observed them from the poop of his half-finished ship, wondering more than ever what their willingness to go to Gaul in winter-time might mean. He had promised them no reward, had offered no inducement beyond that one proposal made to Eough. There was something more than melancholy; there was a determined, almost a religious air to their procession. They resembled ants that he had seen in warmer climes, migrating from abandoned nests.

Conops, staring distrustfully, admitted them through the gate, but though he gave them no direction, they seemed to know exactly what to do. They filed toward the middle of the yard where they squatted densely around Eough who stood in the rough circle in their midst. He began talking to them, but his words were intended for them and none else; his head and hand moved in gestures of emphatic speech, but not even the sound of his voice reached Tros.

They made no answering murmur to the dwarf's remarks, but sat quite still and listened.

Tros sent them dried fish, carrots and cracked wheat. They devoured the food, not eagerly, not even with a display of interest, continuing to listen to Eough's speech. As gloaming deepened they began to resemble ghosts attending a voiceless oracle.

"They make me think of rats that leave a ship," Tros muttered.

The thought made him shudder. Was he himself a rat, deserting his own half-finished wondership? Was Caswallon a rat deserting Britain? Was Britain doomed?

Presently he called Eough over to where the barrels stood, bidding him bring sulphur.

"Mix!" he commanded.

Eough pounded the sulphur and charcoal separately, then mixed a quantity of each with powdered resin and oak sawdust, adding the yellow crystals afterwards. Tros took about a spoonful of the mixture and ignited it in a far corner of the yard. It spluttered as it burned. The stench nearly choked him and the heat, from even that small quantity, was almost incredible. When he returned he found Eough wetting down the sawdust.

"Try again," said Eough.

The stuff was harder to ignite, but jumped and scattered as it burned, making a worse stench than ever. Satisfied, Tros filled up one of the leaden balls with the preparation and inserted an oil-soaked fuse into the hole. Then he filled the remaining nine lead balls in the same way, stowed those where Conops could find them in emergency and ordered the rest of the sulphur, resin, charcoal and yellow crystals carried on board the longship.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE START OF THE MAD ADVENTURE

And if your cause be just, doth Wisdom bid you flinch because the unjust tell you courage is folly?

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

IT was bitter cold that night, with a bright half moon and no more east wind than sufficed to stir a ripple on the surface of the river. Caswallon came near midnight, swathed in furs, accompanied by two of his relations and one serving-man, with enough weapons between them to have furnished three times their number.

Nearly all Lunden turned out to see Caswallon off, most of them wishing him druids' blessings on his venture, all of them pleased that he was running his own risk instead of taxing them to ransom Fflur, but some of them crying farewell to him as if he were sailing on his last adventure. His oldest son, yet hardly old enough to use men's weapons, clung to him, begging and pleading to be taken on the expedition.

"Nay, my son, and for the last time!" Caswallon answered. "Stay here and obey Orwic. Study how to king it in my shoes if I should die over there in Gaul."

Then Eough, under a beacon flare, with cries and weird ceremony, investing Conops with underworld powers with which to guard the yard while Tros was absent; Caswallon adjuring his people to let the yard alone; Eough in person carrying the leaden ball into the middle of the yard, dancing around it, chanting incantation; Conops, torch in hand, as scared as any one.

Conops lit the fuse and hid behind a pile of timber in great haste, although Tros had told him to withdraw with dignity. There was a splutter, a great gasp from the assembled crowd, and then, what had not been foreseen, an explosion. The bomb burst like a thunder-clap, its stenching contents scattering far and wide.

It started three fires in the woodpiles, that had to be doused with earth and snow by terrified British slaves, and the stench, even out in the open yard, was suffocating, almost unendurable. The crowd vanished, most of them pursuing runaway horses.

"Brother Tros, I fear this," Caswallon announced. His face was ashen-gray. "Do we journey in league with all the underworld?"

"No farther under than the bottom of the horsedung in the cave beneath your stables," Tros replied. "I never guessed that stuff would burst. Did you send that messenger to Gaul?"

"He leaves Lunden to-night by chariot to Pevensey, thence in the ship of Lomar, the tin merchant, who put in for repairs three months ago on his way from Ictis and frets to reach Gaul, where he can sell his cargo to the Romans."

Tros laughed.

"Let's hope he didn't see the hot stink burst. I'd rather he'd hear of it. They'll magnify the story. He'll multiply it in his head all the way between here and Gaul. By the time it reaches Cæsar there'll be talk of fifty thousand men on the way, all armed with the guts of earthquakes and the foul breath of Cocytus!"

Caswallon murmured, but the thought of Fflur had him by the heart-strings. He was raised on ancient legend. High romance and derring-do were of the breath he breathed. Knight-errantry, however little practised, lingered in the veins of every well-bred man in Britain, that and a sort of fatalism linked to faith in trial by ordeal. He proposed to confront Cæsar, challenge him in person. He had no other plan, left all else to the Powers of the Unseen Universe that, he believed, took a deeply personal interest in the affairs of men.

It was a mad adventure—only the wan moonlight on the Thames to help them clear the mud-banks, Northmen at the oars, chanting a low dirge about the fights of Odin, all the ship's waist stinking with the crowd of charcoal-burners soaked in fish oil, and only Tros at the helm with any notion what the plan might be.

And even Tros had hardly any plan at all. He only knew the half moon promised him fine weather, and remembered that his father on his death-bed, prophesied a long life for him on many lands and seas, with many a brush with Cæsar, that should end in his becoming Cæsar's more or less ally at last. As he believed in death-bed prophecies, so he believed in giving prophecy an opportunity to work.

"I undertake an enterprise of hazard, knowing a man can not die until his time comes," he assured Caswallon. "My time to die is not yet. Therefore I can not fail if I go forward."

Forward he went, down-Thames on the top of the tide, too busy admiring the longship's motion and her easy steering to let conjecture worry him. He had the gift of letting the past go, living with all his faculties in each existing moment.

"The future," he said to Caswallon, "is the past reshuffled. Who were the Gauls who helped the Romans carry off our wives?"

"The men of Murchan, king of Gwasgwyn who shall die, as I live!" Caswallon answered.

"I remember, Eough said it."

Eough was at the masthead, watching stars, and nothing could persuade him to come down, despite the cold and though Tros shouted to him a dozen times that he could see the stars as well from the after-deck. When he did come down at last, Tros gave the steering oar to Sigurdsen and followed Eough forward to where the graceful bow began its upward curve toward the high serpent figurehead. There he cornered him.

"What have you seen?"

Eough shrugged his shoulders. No speech reveals an artist's inner thought, and there were no words to tell what Eough had seen. The shrug was helpless.

"Good or bad?" Tros asked.

"Some won't like it, but you can't change it," Eough retorted.

"For me, success or failure?" Tros asked.

"That depends on you," said Eough.

"For you, then—what?"

"Depends on me," Eough answered.

Suddenly Tros felt afraid, not of the dwarf but of the dwarf's intentions. Eough sensed it.

"We will pay our fare. We are honest people," he said, blinking, nodding, rubbing his legs to warm them.

"You mean your fare to Gaul?"

Eough nodded again.

"You will do my bidding?"

More nods, three in swift succession.

"Why do you wish to go to Gaul?"

"Britain is no more good for us. Taliesan is dead. There will be war. We get behind the war, to the place whence it comes. In the front of the war where the swords clash and the horsemen hunt men for the sake of killing, it is not good for charcoal-burners."

"Then you won't return to Britain?"

Eough laughed on a high note like a small boy.

"Does a chicken return into the egg?" he asked.

Tros made his first mistake then. He returned to the stern of the ship and took Caswallon into confidence.

"Migration," he announced, "like birds that fly south for the winter, only these birds won't return. You'll have to find new charcoal-burners around Lunden."

For a minute or two Caswallon refused flatly to believe him. As the truth began to filter through the crust of his autocracy, almost his very reason wavered. Rage burned into a frenzy.

"Throw them overboard!" he exploded, gulping. "Lud's liver! The ungrateful, treacherous dogs! Leave Britain, and without our leave? Bid your Northmen gut them! Swine! They have lived in our forests, and we let them live, not even burning their ghastly sorcerer, as we should have, but for Taliesan! This comes of taking reptiles in place of honest men. Here—"

Tros had to restrain him forcibly. He would have leaped into the ship's waist, sword in hand. He wanted to wreak murder on unnatural ingrates. Not that he had ever loved them or rejoiced in them as fellow countrymen. Far might that be from him! They were not even tax-payers. The point was, they had no right to go and ought to be killed for wanting to. They were vermin, godless sorcerers and insolent, ungrateful swine.

He came near to fighting Tros, because Tros dared to protect them.

"I have a plan by which we can succeed with charcoal-burners better than with all your armed men," Tros explained. "These people have been hunted for generations. They are adepts at concealment. They will not be noticed. None will suspect them. They will be grateful to me for taking them to Gaul, and to you, too, if you'll only let them."

But Caswallon would hear none of it.

"You will next ask me to be grateful to those swine!" he thundered.

Nothing calmed him until the tide turned and the ground swell, aftermath of days of storm, pitched and rocked the longship until the rising sun danced like a drunken partner to the figurehead. The King of all the Trinobantes lay down then and vomited his spleen among the lazy, laughing waves.

"Am I a fish?" he groaned. "O Lud! O mother of my sons, that you should have brought me to this pass! Tros, brother Tros, I die! *Whoooo-up! waw-hu-ep-ah!* Bear me a last message to my wife. O Fflur—*eeyuerup*—Ca-Caswallon dared the sea for love of you and—*whooerreeup!*"

Eough massaged him until the blood returned to head, hands, feet and vertigo departed. Caswallon threatened the dwarf with death for touching him, but Eough persisted and Caswallon's own attendants were too sick to interfere. At last the dwarf contrived a fearsome draft of fish oil mixed with onion juice and made Caswallon swallow it, forcing his jaws apart with iron fingers, rolling him over on his back and holding his nose until the mess was down. Caswallon retched and gurgled, but the sickness ceased.

Before long he was sitting up and swearing like a gentleman, rinsing his mouth with sea-water to change the taste, and presently demanding food. Eough cooked it, using charcoal in a sand box forward. And whether the roe venison was hung exactly long enough, or whether Eough wrought miracles of cooking, Caswallon voted it the best food he had eaten in a dozen years.

"You dog of a sorcerer!" he roared. "If shame didn't forbid, I could forgive you!"

But Eough, sure of Tros's protection, cared not at all for kings and went forward to mix ground sulphur with the crystals, charcoal and resin with the sawdust, damping the lot with sea-water and then filling the ten leaden bombs. But he did not insert the fuses yet. He seemed to have a cautious reverence for the offspring of his alchemy, which profoundly impressed the whole ship's company.

Not long after dawn there came a light wind, biting cold but favorable, and Tros set sail. Then, having set a course "with the wind under the lobe of your left ear," he gave the steering oar to Sigurdsen and lay down to sleep on a pile of sheepskins. But Caswallon was in no mood for sleep and insisted on asking questions.

"I will tell you whither we go when the gods tell me! I will sleep on it," Tros answered irritably.

But Caswallon did not believe in that kind of divination, any more than Tros believed in discussing plans that were as yet but half formed in his mind. They had to compromise, each having half his own way, the plan not outlined, but the problem definitely stated.

"I know Cæsar," Tros began. He always began discussions of Cæsar that way. "He does his dirty work by proxy. If it succeeds, he takes the credit; if it fails, he blames his agent. They were the men of Murchan, king of Gwasgwyn who carried off our wives. They will not go to Caritia where Cæsar may be, but will return with their prisoners to Gwasgwyn, where Cæsar will presently follow them, unless the gods prevent.

"But Gwasgwyn is far distant on the western coast of Gaul, so this being winter time, two things are certain. They will not travel all that way by sea, because of risk of storms. Nor did they come all that distance by sea in the first place. Their ship came from some harbor on the northern coast of Gaul, and will return thither, whence they will proceed to Gwasgwyn overland.

"It would be in keeping with Cæsar's character to pretend to rescue our two wives from Murchan's men as the party travels across country. Marius and Galba, you may be quite sure, will hurry to Cæsar's winter quarters by the shortest route, give him all the necessary information, and thereafter hold their tongues or say what Cæsar puts into their mouths.

"Now we are not so far behind that Roman ship. They put to sea in a gale, it is true, but with the tide against them. Later, the wind shifted to the southwest. Then it failed. This ship of ours sails half as fast again as anything the Romans have this side of the Gates of Hercules. If they should go as far as Seine-mouth we might even overtake them, although that is too good to expect. They will make all haste. They will whip the oarsmen.

"I am hoping they will make for Seine-mouth, and I think that likely because it would be an easy place for them to have obtained a fairly good ship and a Gaulish pilot who would know something of the course between there and Thanet. Cæsar has had hard work to find pilots who knew the coast of Britain, but I know there was one such at Seine-mouth because I myself had information from him last year.

"Calculating tides, the wind and one thing and another, I believe they can not reach Seine-mouth much before to-night, near midnight. At any rate, I think they will not sail farther to the west than Seine-mouth, and we may be fairly sure they will make some kind of signal before they reach whichever port they have in mind. That signal will be answered from the shore. If it is night-time, we shall see the signals, a flare from the masthead, some sort of beacon on land. They will not see us, and I know the Seine-mouth estuary. I can creep in unseen in the dark. Thereafter, leave it to the gods, who I think are our friends, not Cæsar's."

Tros curled himself among the sheepskins then and snored in answer to Caswallon's questions. Prods in the ribs took no effect. Apparently he did not hear demands for information as to what use charcoal-burners might be put to, and how he proposed to employ the murderous, hot stinkballs.

But when, after two or three hours, Caswallon himself lay down to sleep, Tros awoke as if by intuition, and, after conning the ship's position, went up to the bow to talk with Eough. They talked for at least an hour in undertones, whereafter Tros lay down again and slept like a man without a trouble on his mind.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE LIBURNIAN

Any fool can stir anger. Cowards, liars, hypocrites and thieves can stir enmity. Ye need no manhood in the broth of vengeance; its ingredients are on the lips of fools, and in the hearts of the proud whose pride is meanness, and of the mean whose pride is ill-faith.

But which of you can change anger into good-will? Which of you can change enmity into friendship? That one hath manhood. Aye, he useth it. The Lords of Life will not neglect to test him. He is worthy, that one, of the hammer-blows of Wisdom, on the anvil of life.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

The wintry wind blew fair for them that whole day long, and the Northmen slept in watches, resting to be ready for the oar work if the wind should fail. When the half moon rose, it fell calm—one of those rare, shimmering nights with stars like silver, when the tinkling sea resembled polished glass and the ice froze brittle on wet rope-ends.

Eough went to the masthead. It was Eough who reported three bright beacons in a row, a mile or more inland, beyond the shadowy low marshes. Seine-mouth estuary lay on the port bow, many miles away. The tide was slack—about to set against them, but also against the enemy, so be the enemy were there. They had seen no glimpse of any ship, but Tros felt more than ever sure his guess was accurate.

"When I sleep, the gods instruct me," he assured Caswallon.

But Caswallon, stamping his feet on deck to keep warm, breaking ice from his moustache, was doubtful of that and of every other article of Tros's faith, until Eough cried out again from where he swayed, a motionless, small phantom, dark against the starlit sky.

"Two lights now on a ship's spar. One at either end!"

Caswallon saw them as the longship lurched over a silent swell.

"Out oars! Row!" he yelled excitedly. "Tros, get your hot stink-engines ready! Lud! We have them! Luck o' Lud o' Lunden! Row, you rascals!"

Distance was deceptive on that dark expanse of water. Tros took thought.

"They could hear oars," he warned. "They have thirty or forty fighting men. If we outrow them and throw the burning stink aboard, we might kill Fflur and Helma. Think, man, think! Don't waste breath."

But Caswallon could only think in terms of chariots and horses, of ambush and sudden swoops on a surprised foe. He cursed the wind that had failed them. He cursed the sea because he could not walk on it. He cursed Tros, because he could not race that Roman ship and ram her, pitch the burning stink into her hold and snatch the prisoners away before it sank with all its crew. He was for action, swift and resolute.

"The stinkballs would kill us as well as them," said Tros, taking the steering oar.

He knew those waters. Setting slow time for the oar-beats, husbanding the Northmen's strength, he set a course in-shore to where the tide would flow against him with less force.

And then the unexpected happened. He caught the sound of oars between him and the enemy.

He ordered silence—let the ship swing any way she pleased—climbed to the masthead and clung there beside Eough. Once, then again, he caught the flash of moonlight on an oar-blade, but the cold air filmed his eyes, and the ship's motion, adding to the heaving of the moonlit waves, made vision difficult. It was a long time before he made out the hull of a long, low rowing boat.

"Liburnian," he muttered.

It was one of those fast boats the Romans used for harbor work and for taking messages to ships at sea, rowed by eight or a dozen men.

He watched with running eyes until the cold grew unendurable, then returned to deck.

"That might be Cæsar himself in that liburnian," he said. "And if I knew it were I would take all chances."

Caswallon did not hesitate.

"I order you! Start the oars again!"

"Not so," Tros answered. "I am captain. You are king of a piece of Britain. I think they come for Marius and Galba, who will make all speed for the shore to convey their news to Cæsar. If we watch the liburnian, we may learn where Cæsar is."

"Cæsar will be where those three lights are," said Caswallon, pointing shoreward toward Seine-mouth.

"No," said Tros, "those are guide lights, three in a line to show the channel."

"Make for them then! Get there first and block the channel!"

"Can't be done," Tros answered. "Tide and a whiff of wind against us. Tide increasing. From that masthead I saw a light in motion, and I think there is a pilot coming out, but it may be one of Cæsar's warships."

He could no longer hear the liburnian, so he lowered the sail and started the oars. Slowly at first, then faster he took the longship nearer shore, until he could discern the low cliffs dimly and could hear the pounding of the surf.

He took a sounding and dropped anchor.

"Now," he said, "if the gods are our friends, we may accomplish something. Cæsar's camp used to be yonder." He pointed. "A small camp, about two hundred infantry and fifty horsemen, near a place where crossroads meet. The bigger camp lies yonder."

He pointed again, this time much farther to the westward.

"See. You can see the watchfires along the rampart. That bigger camp is outside the Gauls' town, maybe a mile away from it. Between that and us lie the harbor and the River Seine. When I was in Gaul, Cæsar hardly ever slept a night in the large camp because it is across the river, which delays the receipt of messages from other points. Except when he is on the march he likes a small camp best and not too many onlookers, not too many men who might report his doings. He has a theory, too, that the legions admire him more if they don't see him too often. It doesn't amuse him to be commonplace. Watch our charcoal-burners."

They were hanging overside, crowded against the landward rail, all as silent as ghosts. Caswallon swore aloud. It irked him to see men eager to leave Britain.

"Throw them overboard! See if they can swim!" he snorted.

But instead, Tros issued food to them, dried fish and roasted wheat in sufficient quantities to last for several days. Then he sent for young Glendwyr to come to the steering deck. Two Northmen brought him, so seasick he could hardly stand.

Caswallon pitied him. He seemed to bear no malice against a rebel taken in the act, defeated and enslaved, although he loathed the charcoal-burners who had never lifted hand against him.

"Come now, Glendwyr," he said kindly, "make me glad I did not hang you. Let me see you play the man."

"I would have hanged you, had rebellion not failed!" the youngster answered. "It would have been more merciful than slavery."

Tros cut that altercation short.

"Your chance!" he said sternly. "If you want your freedom, work for it. I charge no tenths, the way the Romans do.* Whoever serves me faithfully receives freedom, and I hire him thereafter as a free man. What do you say?"

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* By Roman law a freed slave had to pay a tax to the state of a tenth of his market value.

"I am sick. I am fit for nothing," Glendwyr answered.

"So. That is when a man's true spirit shows itself. Sick as you are, do you propose to earn your freedom?"

"How?" asked Glendwyr.

"He is no good," said Caswallon.

But Tros was not so sure. He tried again:

"Will you serve me while my back is turned?"

Once more Glendwyr hesitated. He eyed Tros and then Caswallon.

"I hate you both. Better kill me," he answered.

Tros laughed.

"Young fool, I need no leave of yours if I choose to kill you. You are my property. I offer you a man's chance to be your own man again."

"I crave freedom, but as a free man I will never serve you," Glendwyr answered.

"Never is a long time. We will cross that river when we reach it," said Tros. "Can you swim?"

Glendwyr nodded.

"Can you swim from here to shore? A long way, mind. The sea is like ice. Very well, I'll have two Britons rub you down with fish oil. Put oiled wool in your ears. Wait, I'll lower a boat and send you half way to the shore. You swim the rest. Take food with you tied in a bladder. When morning comes, find out where they have taken the Lady Fflur and the Lady Helma. Bring a message from them back to me. You will have to search for me. I will not be standing on the highest point in sight."

"Very well," said Glendwyr. "But don't talk to me afterwards about faithful service and such balderdash. I serve myself. I have no love for you whatever."

"Nevertheless, remember this," said Tros. "You have owned a slave or two, young fellow, but you are now at the business of being one. No matter how much Cæsar is my enemy, nor how much the Gauls hate Cæsar, and even if I should be taken and crucified, you are a slave. One word from me and you would be proscribed and hunted down. You must return to me to receive your freedom. Nothing for nothing. I give freedom for honest service."

Glendwyr nodded. As a man whose father had owned slaves he understood the system. All freemen of whatever race were in league against the slave, and those who had themselves been manumitted were the worst of all. A runaway slave's sole hope of escaping crucifixion was to take to the mountains as an outlaw, or to enlist in some foreign mercenary army. But the latter was impossible where Rome held sway.

Tros ordered the rowboat put quietly overside, told off two charcoal-burners to rub Glendwyr, face and all with oil, and climbed once more to the masthead where he remained for half an hour. When he returned to the deck he looked pleased, although his teeth were chattering.

"What like was Lomar's ship?" he asked. "He who carried tin and took your messenger?"

Caswallon described the ship as nearly as he could, but he could have described a horse much better.

"All the Ictis tinships carry an iron basket at the masthead, in which they burn towflares, that the ship may see the way by night, or for some such reason."

Tros chuckled.

"That is not a Roman warship coming out. Tide and wind must have carried Lomar from Pevensey to Seine-mouth, where I suppose the Romans ordered him to make haste to Caritia. Now he is coming out of Seine-mouth on a tide that will take him two-thirds of the way. Is Lomar any kind of friend of yours?"

"Aye, surely. Many times he has brought tin and traded it for wool in Lunden."

"Go borrow that iron basket from him then. Four Northmen shall row you. Put Glendwyr into the water half way between here and the shore, and then row to meet Lomar's ship. Wait! Has he a figurehead?"

"No, his ship is a blunt-bowed thing, not nearly as long as this but, I should say, as high out of the water. No figurehead before or behind."

"Axes!" Tros commanded.

And almost before Caswallon had stepped overside into the rowboat with four Northmen all armed to the teeth, Sigurdsen and some others, grumbling superstitiously, were chopping off the long-necked serpents that adorned the longship's ends.

"Now we shall have no luck at all!" growled Sigurdsen. "As well lop off a horse's head and tail!"

But Tros leaned overside and gave additional instructions to Caswallon:

"First and foremost, borrow that iron basket. Second, get all the news you can from Lomar. Third, try to persuade him to stand far out to sea, so that he will be out of sight by morning, or else to anchor before morning in some land-locked cove where the Romans aren't likely to see him."

Caswallon was rowed away and again Tros climbed to the masthead. Presently in the wan light of the moon he caught sight of the liburnian returning shoreward. The light at Lomar's masthead had burned itself out, but beyond it two small lights at either end of a spar explained that another ship was laboring under oars, presumably trying to enter the channel against the tide.

Then came mist on a breath of warmer air. White cat-tails puffed along in streaks prophetic of a dense fog. Tros began to fear Caswallon might be lost, began to wonder whether he must burn a flare for him and risk all consequences.

So an hour passed. Once, he heard a distant crash that sounded not quite like a long wave bursting on the shingle. Long after that he heard the heavy thump of long sweeps and the squeak of a swaying spar as Lomar's ship went by. The mist increased, but with occasional puffs of wind that blew long sea-lanes, down which the moon shone brightly. Then oars again, the steady thump and swing of seamen born to the business, and presently Caswallon's hail out of a fog bank—

"Tro-o-o-s!"

He shouted back to give them the direction. Five more minutes and Caswallon came climbing up, wet to the skin. The Northmen followed, dragging up a huge iron basket.

"Lud's luck!" Caswallon announced. "Give me dry clothes, Tros. We got Marius and Galba. Slew them both! Your Northmen are first rate fellows! Row? Lud's backbone! We came full speed out of a bank of fog and crashed into the liburnian! Look at the boat's bow! Lucky you built her of oak or we'd be swimming yet! We upset the liburnian and Galba jumped aboard us. I hacked his neck through clear to the backbone, so he couldn't tell me much. Then

Marius got both hands on the boat's edge and one of the Northmen helped him in.

"He knocked them overboard and rushed at me, so I had to stop him, point to the throat. He went over backward and vanished. Armor too heavy, I suppose. Then I had to pull the two Northmen out of the water. The fools can't swim! One of them pulled me in. By Lud, I'm as wet as a fish. Liburnian's crew? Oh, the Northmen knocked them on the head with oars as they tried to swim. There'll be no tales told ashore! Glendwyr? Yes, he left all right, swimming strong, blowing like a porpoise. Just before he jumped in he said he was sorry he'd insulted you. He asked me to say he would do his best and he wishes you druids' luck.

"Lomar? Yes, we tackled him after we scuttled the liburnian. Lomar put into Seine-mouth, leaking badly, but he has sickness aboard, so the Romans sent him out again on the tide and told him to dump his sick men overboard out of sight of land. Lomar's as mad as a forked eel. He wants the money for his tin, but the Romans won't pay him until he takes it to Caritia and he's afraid his ship isn't seaworthy. He intends to put into a cove before morning and try to patch her up, but he says if the Romans catch him there, they'll chase him out to sea. So he'll have to be careful."

"How much tin has he?" asked Tros.

"As much as his ship can carry, stowed under a structure like a house-roof around the mast, not unlike the one we have on this ship. He set my messenger ashore before he left port. The man jumped overside and swam for it. And you were right, Tros. He's already talking about fifty thousand men. Lomar asked me whether it's true that the druids have armed us with thunderbolts. I told him yes. Cæsar's ears will burn by morning!"

Tros ordered the iron basket hoisted to the masthead and fixed in place.

"Now we needn't worry," he said. "We're Lomar's ship. Was his hull pitch black?"

Caswallon nodded, pulling on warm, dry trousers that one of his own attendants offered, making shift himself with blankets out of Tros' store.

"Luck o' Lud!" said Tros. "It looks like it. Lomar with a sick crew, the Romans will never venture near this ship. They'll never doubt we're Lomar. Mist, and no sign of wind. Plenty of time between now and morning. Sigurdsen!"

The giant Northman stood before him, arms folded on his breast.

"I never tempt a friend beyond his strength," said Tros. "This was your ship once. You shall come ashore with me. You and the four best men you have. Caswallon, will you leave your party on board here? Then we needn't be afraid that our Northmen will put to sea and leave us."

Sigurdsen scowled. Caswallon laughed.

"You doubt my faith?" asked Sigurdsen.

"Not I," said Tros, "but I propose to test it like a new rope, not using too much strain at first. You, I, the Lord Caswallon and Eough for the shore. We will try to steal more boats to land the charcoal-burners. Put those stinkballs into the boat. Let Eough have charge of them."

CHAPTER XLIX

LUCK O' LUD O' LUNDEN

Some of you pray for Lud's luck. And the worldly wise mock you, saying Luck loves only strength and wealth and cunning. But I tell you, ye reap as ye sowed in former lives; and in this life ye are sowing what ye shall reap in lives to come. Faith, hope, courage, these three are the seeds of Good Luck. Sow ye therefore, lest the unused seed should rot.

It is too late now to change what ye call Luck. Ye must reap as ye sowed in former lives. But Destiny depends on how ye sow and what ye sow in this life. Faith, hope, courage—greed, fear, malice. Choose. As ye sow ye shall reap.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

THEY found three boats keels upward on the beach, but it took until dawn to land the charcoal-burners because the boats kept losing themselves in the fog between ship and land.

"The women. The children," Eough demanded when the last of his skin-clad men stood shivering on shore.

Tros grinned.

"They are no use to you yet," he answered. "Business first."

"I have never broken a promise," said the dwarf.

"Nor I," Tros answered. "You shall have those women and children when the work is done."

Eough shrugged his shoulders philosophically, but he did not like the idea of having to leave hostages in Tros's hands. He set the stinkballs higher up the beach and waited for further orders.

"Now remember," Tros advised him, "if the Romans see you they will make sport of you because you are small, and you will have a hard time to get away from them. Some dealer might even claim you as a slave. Or you might be kidnaped and smuggled away to Rome. Keep out of sight as much as possible. Choose your best man and send him to offer faggots for sale to the legionaries.

"They're the most improvident wastrels in the world with fuel. At the rate they were burning watchfires last night, no wood-stack would last a week. They're certain purchasers. He'll find the quartermaster who does the purchasing in a building that faces the front entrance of the camp. Let him bargain a bit for appearance' sake, but be sure he accepts finally whatever price is offered.

"The rest of you go to the woods you'll find in that direction—" he pointed southward— "glean faggots, and conceal the stinkballs in the largest ones. Then, when your man has done the bargaining, carry the faggots into the camp and stack them where the quartermaster shows you. Your men must return to the woods to sleep, but you report to me. Leave two of your men here. One of them will find you later on and tell you where I'm hidden. The other will find Glendwyr and tell him."

Eough concealed the stinkballs under heaps of seaweed in the charcoal-burners' baskets and departed into the fog, as business-like as if he were leading a hundred slaves to market.

"Did he understand at which camp he is to offer wood for sale?" Caswallon asked.

"Yes, the smaller one, where Cæsar may be."

"What if Cæsar is not there?"

"What if the gods are not around us!" Tros retorted. "I never think in terms of 'what if not.' I look at what is. Let us do our part and trust the gods to do theirs. Observe this fog. Could the gods have dropped a better screen over our movements? I will believe the gods are neutral when I see it proved! We are hostages to luck. The gods love boldness. Forward!"

Nine of them, Tros leading and two wretched-looking charcoal-burners last, began to march inland, pausing frequently to listen for voices or footsteps, following a footpath but avoiding habitations, seeking high ground in order if possible to get above the mist.

They were discovered and barked at by the dogs, but no harm came of it. And at one place where they crossed hoar-frosted grassland, three stray horses made them believe they had been detected by Cæsar's cavalry. Discovering the mistake, Caswallon would have caught one of those horses and ridden it, had Tros permitted; but horse theft was too likely to have started hue and cry.

Caswallon was still obsessed by the notion of finding Cæsar and challenging him to single combat. As simple as a child where chivalry concerned him, he was even nervous lest Tros should claim precedence and fight the Roman first. In vain Tros told him twenty times that Cæsar would consider himself too civilized for that kind of encounter.

"He murders by proxy at wholesale. He is brave in battle, but he would laugh at the idea of trial by ordeal."

"I have heard," Caswallon answered, "that the Romans are great fighters, hand-to-hand. Marius told me that even their public games are fights to the death in an arena between picked antagonists."

"Foreigners fighting, Romans looking on!" Tros answered. "Another of their pretty little games is watching prisoners torn by wild dogs. I tell you, if you should walk up and challenge Cæsar, he would simply have you put in chains and keep you to grace his triumph when he goes to Rome." *

Caswallon refused to believe it. Unwillingness to upset Tros's plan was all that prevented him from going there and then in search of Cæsar. And even so, if he had known how vague Tros's plan still was, he might have gone in any case. Tros was simply trusting in what Caswallon would have called, "Lud's Luck."

They reached high ground at last and lay down behind a fallen tree to munch cold breakfast and wait for the mist to disperse. They could hear the tubas blow in Cæsar's camp, the occasional galloping footfall of a mounted messenger, shouting and the usual medley of camp noises, but they had little idea how close they were. When

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* See Cæsar's *Commentaries* for his own admission of how he treated Gaulish chiefs who presented themselves before him, relying on his supposed chivalry.

the fog did lift at last, leaving a light haze, they discovered they were hardly a quarter of a mile away. They could see Cæsar's tents—the little one he slept in, and the big one, sumptuously furnished, warmed with charcoal braziers, with the standards pitched in front of it, in which he lived by day.

There was no doubt, after they had watched for half an hour, that Cæsar was in the big tent. A constant stream of messengers came and went. Men who appeared to be important officers stood near the tent in groups, entering one by one as they were summoned. The camp was laid out spaciously and contained more wooden huts than tents. Bright fires were burning at each intersection of the lines, and at those groups of soldiers stood warming themselves; but most of the officers and men, not on actual duty, were pacing solemnly in twos along the rampart, or to and fro on the parade ground.

"How shall we reach Cæsar?" Caswallon grumbled.

But Tros was studying the woodstack, which, as he had guessed might be the case, was running low.

It was heaped about midway between Cæsar's tent and the rear camp entrance, and had a ragged, untidy look from having been extravagantly requisitioned the preceding night.

"We will stay here," said Tros. "This place serves perfectly."

In a low voice he gave his orders to the two charcoal-burners, having learned long since in dealings with them that the only way to make them even wish to understand him was to moderate his voice. They nodded and went off in different directions, one toward the woods to the southward, the other toward the harbor where Cæsar's new fleet was building and twenty or thirty ships, unrigged as yet, lay anchored.

Suddenly Tros gripped Caswallon's forearm.

"Hermes! That fellow Cæsar is a swift one! Look!" He pointed to where a long, white road ran nearly due south over the horizon. "That tale of ours of thunderbolts and fifty thousand men and an invasion worked! He takes precautions, whether or not he believes the news!"

The advance guard of a legion, mounted men with their helmets and covered shields swung over-shoulder, jogged over-hill, blurred by the haze, and there was infantry behind them. Men with ropes and pegs were already marking off at one end the lines for new ditches and ramparts, to enlarge the camp.

"Luck?" said Tros. "We have it all! This arriving legion will want fuel. They'll requisition most of Cæsar's small stack. Our charcoal-burners will find a ready market. They'll be heaping faggots all day long to replenish Cæsar's pile while the new legion's foragers pile up a heap of their own."

And so it happened. A fatigue party reduced the fuel stack by two-thirds its bulk, throwing it near the middle of the rectangle being marked out for the use of the arriving legion.

But presently the light haze cleared away before a breath of wind, and Tros changed his mind about the luck being all his. He felt a cold chill creeping down his spine, that had nothing to do with the frosty air. He could see far out to seaward. His jaw jerked forward and his amber eyes glared like an angry cat's.

"Fool!" he muttered. "Idiot! I might have known the sea was my sphere and the dry land Cæsar's!"

He pointed. Almost out of sight to westward, the ship from which the liburnian had carried Marius and Galba to their doom toiled against the tide along the coast.

"They put in to drop Marius and Galba! They mean to land the women somewhere nearer Gwasgwyn! Zeus! Trust Cæsar to pretend to have nothing to do with the business until he can find some way of covering his own tracks! Lud, Lud, Lud, Lud! What now?"

"To our ship! Back to our ship!" Caswallon urged instantly. "Up anchor. Give chase!"

For about ten breaths Tros thought of that. Then:

"No!" he said simply. "Can't desert Eough and the charcoal-burners."

"Phaugh!" Caswallon snorted. "Those swine?"

"They have our stinkballs."

"We have courage. Our wives are yonder!"

"If we stay here, young Glendwyr will get word to us."

"Of what we already know! Let Glendwyr rot! Come on, Tros! Back to the ship!"

"No!" said Tros.

"Lud's blood, man! Why not?"

"Because the gods love men who do not change their plan at every setback. Because I can see Eough and his hundred bringing faggots from the woods. Also because if we should move our ship in the wrong direction, the Romans might suspect it is not Lomar's tin ship after all; and they can move by land much faster than we could row against the tide. Here we lie unsuspected. Let us see what happens."

"Lie here like a frozen dog while Fflur, the mother of my sons—"

Caswallon set his jaw and lapsed into angry silence, glancing at Tros from time to time as if he had begun to lose all confidence in his ally. But Tros watched Cæsar's camp and the legion, tramping down the long white road, singing, shields and helmets slung over their shoulders; wagons, war machines, camp followers* and women trailing in the rear.

After a while even Caswallon forgot impatience as he watched the marvel of a Roman legion making camp, the speed with which they dug the ditch and earthwork, the total absence of confusion, the unhurried ease with which the tents and wooden huts were raised in regular, straight lines.

"If I could make my Britons work like that!"

"Then you would conquer all Britain! What good would it do you and the other tribes?" Tros answered. "Rome is a disease. She has no virtue except discipline."

Eough and his charcoal-burners made three trips from the forest, stacking their faggots hardly fifty yards away from Cæsar's tent, before the legion's foragers began to march away in parties to attend to that work themselves. Apparently the charcoal-burners were paid off. They returned to the forest but made no reappearance on the scene. The Roman foragers cut trees down, split the wood and stacked it around and about the charcoal-burners' pile, hauling some in wagons, some piled high on mules. By noon the heap was almost mountainous, and the last loads were delivered direct to the soldiers for the night's use, the wagons going the round of the rampart and cross-wise up and down the camp, dumping separate heaps at every intersection.

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* Calones and lixae: Calones were slaves who, from constant attendance on an army on the march, attained considerable skill in the management of baggage and in similar services. The lixae were free men who followed for purposes of trade, to buy loot and prisoners for the slave and gladiator market.

Then, a little after high noon, Cæsar himself in his scarlet cloak emerged from the great tent to be fawned on by his generals and parade the camp awhile, pausing at intervals—a figure of dignified gesture—the crowd around him backing away as he swept with his right arm in the direction of whatever he discussed. Once he pointed straight at where Tros and Caswallon were concealed and for three minutes they lay with bated breath, forgetting how impossible it was that he should see them or know they were there.

Cæsar returned to his tent, and not long after that came Eough, boy-voiced, a trifle querulous, guided by that charcoal-burner who had gone in search of him. The Romans had not paid his men. The quartermaster had told them to return to-morrow for the handful of copper money due them. Eough was as disturbed about that as if it were Tros who had broken a promise to himself.

"That Roman intends to swindle my people," he complained.

Tros laughed and called him Xenophon, a jest that only aroused Eough's ire because he had no notion what it meant. He demanded the women and children.

"I have done my work. The stinkballs are under the woodpile with a fuse set into each, and each about a man's length distant from the other."

The dwarf stood arms akimbo, stomach out, pouting his lips, his bare toes clenching at the hard ground.

"Shall I curse you?" he suggested.

"Go and curse Cæsar!" Tros advised him. "Some one has to fire that woodpile between now and midnight. None but you can get into the camp and stay there after dark. They turn out all strangers at sunset. But, as I told you last night, Romans are mad about omens; Cæsar as mad as the rest.

"If you present yourself at the camp gate they will take you straight to Cæsar as a curiosity. If you tell Cæsar you can read the stars, he will order you to cast his horoscope. Tell him you must watch the stars alone, uninterfered with, and go and sit near the woodpile. But don't set fire to it until just after they have changed the watch, midway between sunset and midnight."

"I don't want to be sold and sent to Rome," the dwarf retorted. "I don't want to be crucified for burning woodpiles. I know Cæsar's horoscope already. He will die by the knife when his time comes. You can't kill him."

But Tros knew Eough's weakness, which, like any other man's, lay underneath his pride.

"You could obtain a big reward by going straight to Cæsar and betraying us," he suggested.

"Dung-Heap Tros! Fish-Oil Tros! When did you and I break promises?"

"Then go to Cæsar. Do as I bid you. Remember all I told you last night. I will set the women and children ashore before daylight if the woodpile burns."

Eough stuck out a tongue at him.

"I go," he said. "I do it. But I know your horoscope, too. Like Cæsar, when your time comes, you will die with iron in your belly."

Eough turned on his heel and walked away, making discontented noises with his teeth and tongue. Caswallon rose to his knees, loosening his sword from the scabbard.

"I go to kill that dwarf," he explained when Tros tried to restrain him. "He will sell us to Cæsar as surely as we lie here. Better please the gods by killing him now. You or I can creep into the camp and fire the woodpile."

"Kill me instead, if I shall judge wrongly," Tros answered. "That dwarf thinks more of his charcoal-burners than of you or me or Cæsar or all the money Cæsar could pay him. And more than that again, he values his own promise! He will do exactly what I have told him to. But if we should play him false thereafter, and not set those women and children ashore, I would not give a denarium for either of our lives. Eough is a keeper of bargains."

Mightily dissatisfied, Caswallon let Eough go, but a dozen times he changed his mind and wanted to send the Northmen after him to kill him before he could reach the camp. It was only because the Northmen refused point-blank that he at last subsided, growling to himself.

"It is not good to kill dwarfs," Sigurdsen explained. "That man is a cousin to the Zwergs and Trolls. He has the mind of seven men in the body of the seventh of one. Seven curses lie on whoever kills him."

Whether Sigurdsen made that up merely to support Tros or whether he believed it, he impressed Caswallon, who lay quiet until nearly sunset, watching the camp activities through mist that gradually settled into fog as night drew near. The fog rather worried Tros. Eough's story of sitting alone to watch the stars would hardly be likely to pass muster.

And then at sunset Glendwyr came, guided by the other charcoal-burner who had found him wandering along the seashore, looking for Tros where the boats were upturned on the beach. Glendwyr was brief.

"They were landed in the ship's boat on the far side of the river, and the ship has vanished westward. The Lady Fflur sends loving greetings to the Lord Caswallon. The Lady Helma has escaped."

"Zeus!" Tros sprang to his feet. "Where is she?"

"Come," was all Glendwyr said, and jerked his head in the direction of the sea.

They left Sigurdsen and his fellow Northmen lying there to watch Cæsar's camp, and followed Glendwyr through the thickening fog. He would have gone at a jog-trot, but Caswallon seized his arm, ignoring risk, questioning him loudly.

"What else said my wife? How was she? Have they treated her with courtesy? Where is she now?"

It was only when he tried to talk that it appeared how exhausted Glendwyr was. He was eager to finish his task before he dropped.

"In the larger camp beyond the river. Yes, she is well," he gasped.

It was Tros who detected blood, for Tros was following. There was an open wound on the back of Glendwyr's right thigh. He overtook him and felt it.

"Javelin," said Glendwyr. "Glancing blow. Not deep."

Tros swore under his breath as Glendwyr broke into a trot. Now the whole plan had gone skyward! It was brave of Helma to escape, but Pluto! They would inform Cæsar, there would be hue and cry, two thousand men would search like trained hounds, they would put out in boats and search the longship.

"We are done for now!" he muttered.

Down by the shore between three water-rounded rocks, not a hundred paces from the place where they had left the boats, lay Helma. Tros knelt and took her in his arms, but for a long time she could not speak to him, until the warmth of his body brought response at last, he lending her, as it were, a reflection of his own vitality. She was wet to the skin, but the back of her deerskin dress was drenched with blood and he could feel the broken-off end of an arrow protruding below her shoulder-blade.

Caswallon stood by, saying nothing, only he drew his sword and felt the edge of it with his left thumb. Glendwyr sat down with his back against a rock.

"Helma! Helma!" Tros kept repeating.

She spoke at last. He held his ear to her lips but there was no need. The spirit in her burned high like the last flame of an exhausted lamp and her voice had strength in it.

"Lord Tros, I grieve I may not bear your sons. Set Glendwyr free."

"Glendwyr!" said Tros, very loud, sparing one glance for him. "You are free!"

"He found us. We were in a hut outside the camp. But now they have taken Fflur inside. He whispered. Then—in the fog—I crept out to talk with him. Too many sentries. Farther away. Fog. And then—I thought of you—if I am killed, no need to fight for me—if I reach you, my proper place—father of my son, Lord Tros. But never now. We ran—and we ran. Glendwyr knew the way. Boat down by the river, but only a pole—no oars. Sentries running after us, and it took time to launch the boat. Arrow—and I lay in the boat. Glendwyr was hurt—something knocked him overboard and he lost the pole. He swam, guiding the boat. And then—when he called to me to help him in—I couldn't. Fog. Tide. We struck a sandbank. He lifted me out. I lay on the water. He dragged me. After that, I don't know, but I suppose he carried me to this place. O Tros, I grieve—press me closer, so. It is warm— I grieve your son might not be born before I die."

She died in his arms as he knelt there, he saying to her what he had not known was in him to be said. When she had breathed her last he looked for Glendwyr, to repeat to him that he was free.

But Caswallon was talking to Glendwyr, binding a strip from his own good linen shirt on Glendwyr's thigh, talking, acting as toward an equal.

"Luck o' Lud o' Lunden? I begin to doubt it! Lud lives in the Thames. He doesn't care for us in Gaul! I had a good ally in Tros as long as his own wife was a prisoner, but—"

Tros cut that conversation short.

"Luck or none," he interrupted, "will you help me launch a boat?"

Through the fog, and in spite of the fog, Caswallon's face loomed savagely resigned.

"I will," he said, snapping his jaws tight.

"I will lay my wife aboard the ship," said Tros, "and leave Glendwyr there because of his wounds. Then we will return for your wife and attend to it that Cæsar pays the bill."

Caswallon sighed, grinned and gripped Tros's shoulder:

"Brother Tros," he said. "I grieve, I did you wrong. I should have known you would see this through. It was Lud's own luck when you and I made friends!"

CHAPTER L

THE GODS! THE GODS!

Why praise the gods? Why blame or thank them? Do your duty and the gods will do theirs.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DRUID TALIESAN

In fog so dense that they could hardly find the shore, so dense that when they did reach shore they lost themselves a dozen times, Tros and Caswallon found their way at last to where Sigurdsen and the Northmen waited. Sigurdsen reported that a search for Helma had begun. Roman soldiers, quartering the fog, calling to one another to keep touch, had almost stumbled on them.

"Helma is dead," Tros told him, expecting the news would arouse the shivering Northmen's fighting spirit. But Sigurdsen merely gloomed about it, and the other Northmen took his view.

"I said we would have no luck after we chopped down those figureheads. We will all be dead men presently," said Sigurdsen, fingering his ax.

Tros solved that problem Spartan army-fashion, as Leonidas once did the while his frozen handful waited for the Persians in the high gap by Thermopylæ. He set them all to playing leap-frog, until the blood ran warmer in their veins and the solitary charcoal-burner who had guided Glendwyr bolted because they looked like jumping goblins in the fog.

At last when all were breathless, and Caswallon had wrestled Sigurdsen until the giant lost his temper from having so much the worst of it, Tros raised both arms, adjuring gods whom neither Northmen nor Caswallon knew by name:

"Ye Guides! Ye Powers! Ye, whose thoughts enfold us! Ye, whom Father Zeus breathed forth! Uphold us!"

Forward then, blood tingling, to where the watchfires burned around the four-square rampart, blurred by the fog until they seemed a wall of crimson, decorated with the sentries' silhouettes. By the main gate there was a beacon brighter than the rest, whose flame danced on the guardhouse wall and on the figures of at least a dozen sentries.

The gate at the rear was almost equally well lighted, but those at the two sides, narrower and less used, had been blocked at sunset with spiked logs set firmly on wooden supports, and were guarded by only two sentries apiece. However those sentries were wide awake, and there were others near-by, pacing the rampart and tending the watchfires. Hardly a cat could have crept into the camp unseen.

And the Romans took additional precaution, owing to the fog. A patrol of fifty men under a centurion, was marching at a distance of a hundred paces from the rampart around and around the camp at arbitrary intervals. Twice, while Tros and his party lay and wondered what Eough might be doing, the patrol passed so close that they could hear the soldiers' breathing.

One thing was certain, Eough could not make any excuse about the stars; they were invisible. He would need all his ingenuity to invent a reason for approaching the woodstack, to say nothing of remaining near it unobserved. As the hours wore on Tros began to despair of the plan's success.

The Northmen had grown cold again. Their teeth were chattering. Caswallon was growing restless. Tros, depressed to the depths of his being over Helma's death, began to feel that, even though Eough should not fail them, the prospect of success had vanished for the simple reason that his party had no spirit left. They were in no mood to take advantage of surprise.

However, as the patrol drew near for the third time, he heard laughter. Then he heard one legionary mimicking a high-pitched voice. He could only catch fragments of conversation as the patrol went by.

"What did they do with him, Flavius?"

"Fed him and let him make himself a nest inside the woodstack. The funny little rascal said he was afraid of roofs and walls. Our Cæsar took quite a fancy to him, joked about—"

Tros could not hear the rest. It was swallowed in the fog and by the heavy tramp of armed men. Silence, too sudden and intense for comfort, succeeded the jolt of retreating footsteps. The patrol had halted, a hundred, possibly two hundred feet away. Then came the sound of two men marching back, and suddenly the centurion's form loomed out of the fog, his shield in front of him, wrapped in cloth to protect its decorations from the damp air.

"Who is here? What are you doing here?" he demanded, and a legionary stepped up from behind him, sword drawn, ready for emergency.

Tros said afterward that the gods did all the work that night, avenging Helma's death. Yet he himself distinctly had a part in it. He sprang at the centurion and beat him to the ground unconscious before he could utter a cry. Caswallon ran the legionary through below the breast bone, and Sigurdsen's great ax hit home into his brain. His cry, fog-smothered, might have reached the ears of the patrol, but that same second an explosion louder than a thunderclap split night asunder. Green, blue, yellow flame spurted above the rampart, and the sudden ensuing darkness hummed with flying lumps of wood. Then another explosion. Then another. Shouts, yells, a panic of armed men, which is worse than milling cattle. Two more explosions, flame, flame everywhere, sulphurous yellow and blue and green flame, burning with the stench of Styx.

The disordered patrol came charging through the fog to find their officer, but Tros, Caswallon, and the Northmen at their backs were gone straight at the camp, taking the ditch in two jumps, scrambling up the earthwork, cutting down a panic-stricken sentry—none remembered afterward who did that—then standing on the rampart for a moment, breathless, wondering what next.

Below was nightmare—fog, smoke, flame, tents and thatch afire; dark phantoms hurrying through it all, most of them with cloths around their heads, against the stench. Cæsar's tent, by a fluke of luck was standing, not on fire; the glare from the blazing, scattered woodpile threw it into high relief, and the stinking smoke coiled past it like a breath from the infernal regions. Then another explosion.

"I see him!" Caswallon yelled, and leaped off the rampart.

But he saw the wrong man. It was a general in a white cloak that he and Sigurdsen pulled down, gagged, wrapped in the folds of his finery, and bore away into the outer night.

Tros saw Cæsar standing beside a trumpeter, who blew as if his lungs would burst, trying to rally the men out of their panic. Cæsar was leaning on the trumpeter, leaning strangely. He fell when a Northman crashed his ax-blade into the trumpeter's skull. Tros picked him up without a struggle, covered him in his own cloak, felt the body writhing in his arms and recognized the strained, convulsive movements of an epileptic.

"The gods!" he exclaimed. "The gods!"

Away then, and over the rampart, part of the way in the midst of a crowd of fugitives who gagged and coughed at the appalling stench and fled from the flame and the whirling wood. None paused to look at Tros. None challenged him. A last explosion split the darkness with a belch of stenching flame as Tros jumped into the camp ditch, Cæsar in his arms; and there in the ditch he stumbled on Caswallon and Sigurdsen, grunting as they fought in the dark to subdue their captive without killing him.

"I have Cæsar!" Tros gasped, digging his toe into Caswallon's ribs. "Kill that fellow. Come on, hurry!"

Somebody, probably Sigurdsen, struck home into the struggling Roman's neck. He had not surrendered; he could lay no claim to quarter. Tros gave Cæsar to two Northmen, who took him over-shoulder like a long grain sack. The others formed a flying wedge, Tros in the lead.

"To the shore! To the ship!" Tros hissed, and they were off.

Three times they lost their way. A dozen times they had to halt and hide, holding their breath at risk of strangling, while shouting legionaries hurried past them through the dark fog, crying out the names of friends or of company commanders. Once they were seen and challenged; they charged behind Tros and slew—they never knew how many, Caswallon's long sword and the Northmen's axes licking through the fog like tongues of sudden fire.

Behind them all Gaul seemed aroar. The burning booths and woodstack threw a lurid light over the camp, and in the distance from the other camp beyond the river came a stream of torches as the famous Tenth made haste to run, row, swim, roaring to Cæsar's aid.

Cæsar lay still on the Northmen's shoulders when the epileptic fit had spent itself. He was no longer rigid, but unconscious when they laid him in a boat at last and Sigurdsen uncovered his white face.

"Is he dead?" Caswallon asked, in an awed voice sharp with disappointment.

"Not he!" said another voice. "His time hasn't come. You can't kill him. You daren't."

Eough jumped in over the boat's bow as they pushed off.

"Horse-Dung Tros, I have come for my women and children," he remarked. "You must send some men to bring those other boats and row them all ashore."

Thereafter only Eough spoke curtly, giving the direction, seeming to know the way by instinct through a fog so dense that a man could hardly see his hand stretched out in front of him.

Eough was the first up the ship's side, counting the dark herd of heads that murmured to him from the ship's waist.

"Hurry!" he said, "Hurry!" stamping his feet nervously. "Fill the boat with Northmen, Fish-Oil Tros! Send them to bring all four boats back and take my people in one journey. We must all be gone by morning. If the Romans catch me, they'll torture all of us! Hurry! Hurry! Yes, I'll go and show the fools the way."

CHAPTER LI

AVE, CÆSAR!

Slay him? Shoot your arrows at the moon, ye impotently envious! He who hath earned a destiny shall run his course, though earth, air, fire and sea were all in league against him. If the backbone of his vanity be virtue, shall your weakness slay his strength before its time? Ye accuse him of vice. Is it worse, because greater than yours? Ye accuse him of treachery—ye mice that nibble through the bins of honesty. Ye say he plunders—ye who steal each other's good repute, boasting of deeds ye never dared nor did! Ye accuse him of ruthless avarice, ye who lend of your plenty at interest and enslave the debtor's children! Is his evil greater than your evil, so that ye fear him? Look then to your little evil, which is fearful because it is little. Slay that, lest it betray you when the hour of his destiny sendeth him forth to test your manhood.

From the Sayings of the Druid Taliesan

Within the longship's midship house where the mast rose through the peaked roof, there was a thwartship table. On that they laid Cæsar and watched him by the light of a flickering whale-oil lamp.

Helma's dead body lay astern under the little steering deck, in all the state Tros could provide, covered with his purple cloak and watched by her brother Sigurdsen. The remainder of the crew were forward, their low-pitched, awe-struck voices blanketed by the fog and by the sucking of the calm sea overside.

Caswallon fretted, biting at his lip; fretted for no other reason than that he could not honorably fight a man recovering from epilepsy. He believed that epilepsy was a visitation from the gods. Tros knew that Cæsar had conceited theories of the same kind, suffering the inconvenience of ever more frequently recurring fits with a complacency that grew more smug as he advanced in years, in notoriety, in influence and in the estimation of his men.

As the pupils of his eyes at last expanded and the rigor of the seizure lessened with returning consciousness, not moving yet, but breathing easily and seeming to grow aware of his surroundings, Cæsar smiled. Caswallon was about to speak, but Tros made a gesture and they continued to watch so silently that they could hardly hear each other's breath.

Cæsar's characteristic first motion was toward his bald head with the forefinger of his right hand. Then he felt at his pallium, as by instinct, making sure his thighs were covered decently.* He felt at his head again and frowned. There was no wreath there. Consciousness of baldness irked him.

None spoke yet. Tros was the first whom he stared at, and he recognized Tros almost instantly, but no fear traced itself on the pallid face. Rather, his eyes grew distant and more dignified. Then he looked at Caswallon curiously.

"Who are you?" he asked, speaking Latin.

Caswallon understood the question, not the words.

"I am Fflur's husband. I have come for her," he said in Gaulish, and Cæsar understood that language well enough. A whimsical smile flitted over his lips.

"So you are Fflur's husband. What a title!"

Again he spoke Latin. Caswallon lost the gist of the remark, but Tros, who understood it, set his face hard. He plucked Caswallon's sleeve and drew him to where the sailcloth curtains closed the rear end of the cabin.

"Men with the falling sickness," he said in low tones, "recover swiftly when the fit has spent itself. They tell me Cæsar's brain is even more than usually active after an attack. Are you willing to abandon Fflur to the Roman's mercy, say for a week or two?"

Caswallon shook his head. He seemed surprised that Tros should ask the question. Tros nodded, now sure of his ground at any rate.

"I would have given the same answer, were she my wife. But I warn you, we have a difficult part to play against a master strategist."

Cæsar sat up on the table, smoothing his pallium and leaning back against the mast.

"Give me a napkin," he commanded. And then, when Tros had passed him a piece of linen and he had wiped the dry froth from his lips, "Where am I?"

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* Authorities seem to agree that Cæsar, even when being slain by the conspirators under Balbus' lead, took thought to cover himself decently.

It was Tros who answered.

"You are at sea, in my ship. You are the Lord Caswallon's prisoner."

"Very well," Cæsar answered in Gaulish, "I will deal with him." He eyed Caswallon with a very piquant curiosity. "What are your terms?"

Caswallon paused, stared steely-eyed at him, then spoke deliberately:

"Had you been a man, you should have fought me hand-to-hand. That would have been the end of you."

Cæsar smiled.

"And I suspect the end of Fflur then also," he intimated with a dry nod. "Let me see. Unless my memory plays tricks, your wife is in one of my camps at Seine-mouth. Marcus Balbus, I think, is in attendance on her. A very safe man, Balbus. I would like a drink."

Tros gave him red wine in a silver cup. He drank a little of it and returned the cup with a gesture as if Tros were his servant.

"It is very cold here," he said then. "Have you nothing to cover me?"

Tros pulled a heavy blanket out from underneath the table. Cæsar wrapped it over his knees and shoulders. Caswallon, bridling at the Roman's air of confidence, spoke again and his voice was harsh. He had none of Cæsar's sarcasm and did not know how to assume it.

"I have heard you described as a woman. I do not fight women."

"No," Cæsar interrupted, "you are a woman's husband. I heard you say so. Now if you will name the amount of the ransom, we will make arrangements to procure the money with all speed, so that I may get away from this abominably cold ship. Then you can run away back to your island, where I will presently come and teach you what it means to submit me to this indignity. Name the ransom. I will pay it."

"How will you pay for the life of the Lord Tros's wife, whom one of your soldiers slew?" Caswallon asked him.

"We will see," said Cæsar. "I will deal with Tros when his turn comes. Name the amount of my ransom."

Caswallon blew a great snort.

"Ransom! You would wring the money from the Gauls. I am no enemy of the Gauls or of the druids that I should turn you loose on them to extort money to pay me. First, you shall sign an undertaking never again to invade Britain."

"Are you the king of Britain?" Cæsar asked.

"I am king of the Trinobantes."

"Precisely," said Cæsar. "The chief of one small tribe. You have no authority to speak for Britain then, have you? With your, ah, kind permission, I suggest we should confine ourselves to actualities."

He smiled, rearranging the folds of the blanket, apparently as unconcerned as if he were discussing last week's murderous games in the arena.

Caswallon glared, and glanced at Tros. But before Tros could put in a word Cæsar was speaking again, his voice well modulated, calm, amused.

"I suggest you should keep me prisoner and see what comes of it. That may be the best way to teach you and your Britons a lesson. You have made more trouble for me by sending over your emissaries to stir up the Gauls against me than I intend to tolerate. Your wife may stay in Gaul and you may carry me to Britain. I am curious to see your country."

Tros let a bitter smile escape him. Cæsar, too, smiled almost imperceptibly and his eyes betrayed that he knew he held the winning hand. Caswallon tugged at his moustache. Both he and Tros felt rather like small boys in the presence of their superior and both resented it, but before either could speak Cæsar's calm voice filled the silence.

"I suppose you used that dwarf to carry pitch and sulphur into my camp. Clever, very clever! Well, if the dwarf was not killed, my men will catch him, and it may amuse me to make use of him to set your town on fire when I come there with my army."

"We are wasting time," Tros said in an undertone, but Cæsar heard him and looked pleasantly amused.

Time was all-important. If the fog should lift—

Caswallon drew himself erect, bumping his head against the roof-beam, which in no way increased his self-control. He spoke his mind deliberately, harshly:

"You are a reptile! If you were less or more, you would never have sent Marius and Galba to enjoy my hospitality and work this treachery behind my back. I loathe you. I could vomit on you. But you hold the mother of my sons. You are not worth one hair on her head, but because I honor her you must go free in exchange for her, although it shames me that I must pay for her with such a vicious beast as you. Your vile heart looks out through your eyes! So, no more words. You shall go free. But no Roman shall bring Fflur to me. You shall write me a letter and sign it, passing me in to the camp where Fflur is, releasing to me Fflur and those other prisoners whom your lying envoys took, passing us out with military honors, unmolested, free to go where we will and unaccompanied. And while I go to bring Fflur, you shall remain here at the sword-point of the Lord Tros."

Cæsar, watching both men, smiled. He seemed to be hardly interested in Caswallon's speech, hardly to have heard it. It was Tros's face that amused him. Tros, realizing he had forgotten something, ground his teeth. Aboard that ship there was neither stylus nor tablet nor a parchment they could write on! Caswallon, realizing the predicament and swearing under his breath, rummaged among the contents of a shelf beneath the table.

"So you will have to take me with you to your island or else set me ashore unless you elect to kill me," said Cæsar, summing up the situation cheerfully.

His smile was condescending, but it vanished instantly.

"You lie!" Tros answered. And he solved that riddle swiftly, drawing his long sword. Its point touched Cæsar's throat. "Your tablet!" he commanded. "Tablet and stylus! They hang by a cord under your cloak."

He was guessing, but he had guessed right. Cæsar produced them. The waxen tablet lay in a fine silver case that contained stylus and ink to smear over the indentations on the wax.

"Tchutt-tchutt! Remember dignity!" said Cæsar. "Bad manners, Tros, are never creditable."

"Write!" Tros commanded. "Write that you are the Lord Caswallon's prisoner. Thereafter, add what he told you to write."

"Oh, of course, if you wish," Cæsar answered, but he had begun to look amused again. "You understand, I have only your words for it that you will release me afterwards. Don't you think my officers might possibly demur? I suggest you might do better to listen to a proposal from me."

He rose from the table, yawning to hide the fact that he was shivering from cold. He was a little weak still, his knees inclined to tremble, and he sat down again with great dignity, rearranging the folds of the blanket.

"I think we would do better to deal with individuals by name, so I will write this letter to Marcus Livius, who is in, ah, in attendance on the, ah, on the lady and who is in my confidence. Livius will appreciate my feelings. He will avoid publicity. We are close to the shore? Very well. Livius will conduct the, ah, ladies and gentlemen to the shore, as close to this ship as possible.

"One of you may accompany him if you wish; the other may remain with me, and I am sure I shall enjoy the society of whichever of you can tolerate mine for that hour or two. The exchange will take place on shore, and you may take my word for it that there will be no indiscretion on our side, provided there is none on yours. Thereafter, I will give you two hours to be out of sight of land!"

"Write!" Caswallon ordered, pointing at the tablet.

But Tros said nothing.

"Two hours," Cæsar added by way of afterthought, as if he were conceding something for the sake of generosity, "from the time the fog lifts, which it usually does soon after daybreak."

He coughed. The cold fog filled the cabin. Then he wrote in his beautiful, firm hand with the tablet on his lap, Tros holding the lamp for him. When he had done he passed the tablet to Caswallon who gave it to Tros to read. Tros nodded.

"Bring ink and parchment when you come," he whispered.

Two minutes later a Northman crew went overside to row Caswallon ashore, and Tros faced Cæsar alone. At the end of a minute or two of silence he sat down on the table and Cæsar made room for him, leaning his back against the ship's side with his legs stretched straight in front of him.

"Pass me that folded sheepskin," he suggested, and made use of it as a cushion between his shoulders and the wall. "Damp, uncomfortable places, ships' cabins," he went on. "I am no mollycoddle, but I marvel at the hardihood of men who choose the sea for their vocation. Now Tros"—Cæsar's voice changed subtly; he was beginning to use consciously the full force of his personal magnetism— "I promised the last time we met—it was not far from here, I remember, to crucify you whenever I catch you. Put me not to that necessity. Surely there is no real need for me to have to catch you."

"I could crucify you now," Tros answered, "but I will not demean myself. You are too magnificent a rascal to be killed except in fair fight."

"Tros, that is generously spoken. I admire nobility even in my enemies. Did I understand correctly that your wife has been killed by a Roman arrow?"

Tros nodded, chin on hand, elbow on knee, the hilt of his sword where he could reach it instantly.

"The news distresses me," Cæsar went on. "She would have been quite safe, however, had she not tried to escape. Accept my sympathy. And now, Tros, be sensible and listen. You and I are both men who can be magnanimous. We are not barbarians. We are above the little ordinary jealousies and trivial ill feelings. I am willing to confess that I admire you and your cleverness, also your courage. All true Romans admire courage. Let us come to an agreement. I need a truly bold sea captain. I also need the secret of whatever that compound was that blew my camp to pieces. Come now, I will make you admiral of the greatest Roman fleet that ever put to sea."

Tros moved, leaned back against the mast and smiled.

"Yes," he said, "you shall make me a Roman admiral! Mark this, Cæsar, the Lord Caswallon has agreed with you, but I not yet. I pledge no loyalty to Rome, and none to you, but you shall write me that appointment of commander of your fleet and I will make shrewd use of it. Write it or die!" He stood up, arms akimbo.

"Let me remind you that your friend Caswallon, as well as his wife Fflur—"

Tros interrupted:

"If I have to kill you, and I will if I must, I will presently land my crew and cut Caswallon and Fflur free when your man Livius brings them to the beach! Die if you wish! If not, you shall also write to Lomar the ship-master of Ictis a receipt for his cargo of tin, which I need. Ten tons of tin, to be paid for at the same rate as the last consignment, on presentation of that receipt to your agent in Caritia. I will remove the tin from Lomar's ship on my way home."

"A pirate, eh? A pirate at heart!" said Cæsar. "You, who might have been a Roman admiral!"

"A Roman admiral I am, or you die!" Tros retorted. "The tin I take, we will call an admiral's year's pay! You shall write that, too, in the appointment. I know you, Cæsar, and I know the road I take. I saw the mark you set just now below your signature, and I am not so dullwitted but I guessed its meaning. Men in your confidence, Cæsar, have to think swiftly and be swiftly treacherous, eh? Your Livius will send a whispered message, won't he? An ambush on the shore, or failing that, of your magnanimity, you allowed us two hours after the fog lifts, didn't you? Then ships to surround us while we dawdle here at anchor relying on your promise. Hah!"

Cæsar appeared interested and amused.

"You are a fool, Tros," he said after a moment's pause, "but you are not quite such a fool as Caswallon. You have refused my friendship, but he consented to trade Cæsar for a woman! You shall have your parchments, and my enmity. I yield him only my contempt."

"For which he will care no more than I!" Tros answered.

And for an hour after that they sat in silence, Cæsar closing his eyes and, if not sleeping, pretending to. At the end of an hour he coughed again and informed Tros that, in spite of the fog, he would prefer to wait on deck.

"These seizures of mine leave my throat congested. I breathe better in the open."

Tros laughed and touched his sword-hilt. "You shall sit outside," he answered. "But I see you have recovered altogether from the seizure. I remember how strongly you swim!"

He summoned four Northmen and made Cæsar sit between them on an oar-bench, he with his sword drawn standing by. And so they were waiting in a fog that gave no hint of the approaching dawn, when Caswallon's voice hailed them, asking the direction. Tros boomed back to him through hollowed hands and presently Caswallon stepped aboard with Fflur behind him, followed by all the captured slave-women and all except two of the escort who had been captured along with them. Caswallon thrust two sheets of parchment into Tros's hand.

Fflur, one white hand on Tros' shoulder—she had no words for him; they choked her when she tried—stared at Cæsar as if he were some monster she had never expected to behold outside her dreams. Cæsar stared at her and at Caswallon. He was puzzled. Caswallon, looming like a giant in the white fog, laughed at him.

"I heard your fellow Livius giving whispered orders to a slave. So when we reached the shore I smote friend Livius. He isn't dead, but I wager he needs the doctor! He cried out. Did you hear him? Ten fools of your Tenth Legion who escorted us, ran to his rescue, so I put as many as I could into the boat and we came away. The Northmen row well. We were too quick for your frozen Tenth. You must thaw them, Cæsar, before they will be any good against us Britons!"

Cæsar's face betrayed no hint of the anxiety that must have gripped him. He smiled.

"Unhappy Livius!" he exclaimed. "Forever over-zealous! I suppose he was taking precautions to ensure secrecy for my sake. So his whispering alarmed you. Well, well, let us hope he is not too badly hurt." He made a gesture toward the parchments in Tros's hand. "Shall we conclude our business? I am anxious to return to shore before news of my absence—"

Caswallon's loud laugh interrupted him.

"Ave, Cæsar!" he remarked, using all the Latin he knew. "I think you must be the greatest rogue the world has ever seen! You commit foul treachery on me, and then dare to count on my promise to let you go, even though I now have Fflur! Lud's blood and backbone! Well, my promise holds. I made it. You shall go free."

"I admire your sense of honor. It becomes you," Cæsar answered, bowing.

"Write!" commanded Tros, and gestured toward the cabin where the table was.

So Cæsar wrote what Tros dictated, while Fflur, her arms around Caswallon, begged him not to return to shore for the two remaining Britons.

"Let the Northmen take Cæsar and bring them in exchange for him. There will be treachery yet!"

"Not I! This Cæsar is my guest!" Caswallon laughed. "But if he tries to trick me, I will kill him! If the Northmen should go ashore again without me, Cæsar would simply add them to the two of my men Livius has, and we should have the whole work to do over again."

Cæsar came out of the cabin and bowed to them all with condescending dignity, his lips curled with a trace of sarcasm. He hardly glanced at Fflur, but he met Tros's eyes and nodded.

"So we are enemies," he said. "It is a pity."

Then he looked straight at Caswallon, as if he were judging a slave in the market.

"You seem to me a good barbarian but an unwise chief," he remarked. "I will come one of these days and see how barbarous and unwise you really are. And now, are we ready? It is very comfortless and cold here."

Caswallon and four Northmen made another journey to the shore, this time with Cæsar in the boat's stern, while Tros and Fflur leaned overside, listening anxiously for noises in the fog. After an interminable interval they heard Caswallon's shout and Fflur gripped Tros's arm. But the chief was on his way, returning with the two remaining Britons.

"All's well!" he called.

"All's well?" Tros tucked the parchments into his tunic. "Is it? I know Cæsar! Sigurdsen! Up anchor! Out oars! All haste to sea before Cæsar's ships put out of Seine-mouth and surround us!"

CHAPTER LII

"I BUILD A SHIP!"

Whence I came, I know. Whither I go, I know not. I came forth from the womb of Experience. What I know, that I am. What I know not, is the limitless measure of what I may become. Life grows, and I see it. And so I grow, because I know it. I will strike such a blow on the anvil of life as shall use to the utmost all I am. Thus, though I know not whither I go nor what I shall be, I shall go to no home of idleness. I shall be no gray ghost lamenting what I might have done, but did not.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

There were ambassadors from half-a-dozen kings around the fireplace in the great hall in Caswallon's house, and they were dressed in all their finery of jeweled woolen cloth, with golden chains around their necks. Behind them, backs against the long wall, their retainers sat, arms folded—a pattern in half-relief against the shadow that reached to right and left of the door into the gloom of the far-away corners.

Firelight shook the shadows among the ceiling beams and fitfully illuminated shields and weapons, colored designs on the wall-cloth, faces, shapes of a dozen dogs asleep. Oil sconces by an inner door at one end of the hall and two more on the wall that faced it, made halos of light in the smoke from the hearth. A minstrel with a small harp plucked at the strings reflectively, as if searching for music to appeal to many minds in disagreement.

From the vestibule, through the thickness of an oaken door, came thumps of spear-butts and the laughter of men-at-arms, but within the great hall there was hardly any conversation. A man's voice broke too noticeably on the silence for even a king's ambassador to care to voice more than platitudes.

But in a smaller room, by another fireside, there was conference that those ambassadors would have given ears to hear. Tros sat, fist on table, clutching a roll of parchment. Beside him was Sigurdsen.

Fflur faced them, hair in long braids to her waist, her gray eyes watching Tros as if he were the arbiter of destiny. And beside her, Caswallon tugged at his fair moustache, his white skin whiter for the pale-blue figures drawn with fading woad on neck and forearms.

Conops sat on the floor, cross-legged, poking at the fire. Orwic lolled at the end of the table, his interest disguised under an air of cultivated boredom.

The room was so hung with colored draperies as almost to resemble an enormous tent. The door was double-curtained, leather behind embroidered cloth. No sound of what they said could reach the great hall, though they had argued noisily.

"The breadth and length of it is this," Caswallon said at the end of three hours' hot debate, gripping the edge of the table with a great white hand. "These lousy cousin * kings have stirred up the

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* Not necessarily relatives. The word cousin here signifies equals, neighbors, men with similar responsibilities.

druids against me. Some accused me of ambition to be the king of all Britain; others, of cooking an unnecessary war against the Romans. Two of the fools accuse me of befriending Cæsar! Mother of my sons, don't interrupt me!

"Only the gods know what will happen to us now Taliesan is dead. He had wisdom. Ere the breath had left his lips we learned that Rome's ambassadors had snatched my wife while my back was turned. Peace, Fflur! I speak. I say, don't interrupt me!

"They slew Helma, wife of my good friend Tros. And here sits Fflur beside me. I have Tros to thank for it."

"Tros and the luck o' Lud!" said Orwic.

"Tros and the gods and the sorcerer Eough," said Fflur, "but I think my Lord Caswallon did his share."

"Mother of my sons, I would have died for you nine times over like a cat away from home, and have found a tenth life in which to regret you, had I failed! But listen to me! Cæsar had no liking to be taken prisoner, though he thought it a great stroke of strategy to sneak my wife away. He feels his dignity is injured. He swore vengeance, pledging himself to invade us with an army and to burn my house. It is war. There is no gainsaying it. Cæsar will come."

"Not if I have my way, he won't," said Orwic, yawning. "If half what Tros tells us about the man is true, we need only to send him a woman. She can put poison in his drink or run a bodkin through his heart or—"

Fflur interrupted in a voice as vibrant as her father's, who was Mygnach the Dwarf. And they said of him that he could ring bells merely by speaking at them.

"If I thought you meant that, Orwic, I would forbid you the house!"

"Nay, nay, I can't spare Orwic," said Caswallon. "Let him talk as he pleases, so be he plays the man in action. Cæsar will come with an army—"

"Not before summer," Tros put in. "He will need time to prepare his army and to pin the Gauls down tight before he leaves them in his rear."

"Worse and worse!" remarked Caswallon. "If he came before the indignation dies, my men would fight. I might even persuade these craven cousin kings to lend me ten or fifteen thousand men. But already the kings send word by their envoys that this quarrel with Cæsar is of my making, so I must pay for their help if I need it. And if Cæsar waits a few months, my men will be saying the same thing. Lud! Lud! Lud's blood!" he exclaimed. "This kinging it is a man's task, but there is small reward in it!"

"We talk, we talk," groaned Orwic. "What are we going to do?"

"I build a ship!" said Tros, and struck the table with his parchment.

Fflur nodded, her eyes on Tros as if she could see the thought behind his massive forehead. The amber of her ornaments was not more yellow than his eyes. The gray of her eyes suggested no more strength of will than did the line of his jaw, neck, mouth and shoulders. She was Athena to his Poseidon, she quietly wise, he capable of tempests before which cliffs would shatter.

"In the ship, Tros, you will sail away. And then what?" she asked.

"Sigurdsen knows," he answered, "and Conops knows. Now I will tell you and I think you will not laugh, although my friend Caswallon will believe me mad and Orwic will mock me at risk of being sat on hot coals on the hearth! The world is round, and I will sail around it!"

Again Fflur nodded.

"You know too much, Tros," she said quietly. "And still too little for your own good."

"Tros knows enough to stand like a true man by his friends," said Orwic. "Mad? I like that kind of madman. The world has my permission to be square if it so pleases, and Tros, if he wishes, may call it a triangle. Nonetheless, I sail with him on his adventure."

"Not you!" Tros retorted. "I need men who are obedient!"

"Kill me in single combat, or prepare my quarters in the ship," said Orwic blandly.

Caswallon's face fell, for he loved Tros like a brother. More than that, he counted on his knowledge of the Romans and his passion to wreck Cæsar's schemes of conquest. But he knew Tros too well to try to set obstructions in his way, and he knew there was no holding Orwic.

"How soon will the ship be finished?" he asked, trying to mask his disappointment.

"Soon, and for many reasons. A ship's genius is motion," Tros replied. "She will rot if she sits still too long—on land or water. My genius, too, consists in action. I am no use at this waiting game. I lose my temper if a dozen popinjays of kinglets strut and claw like poultry clucking for grain that is still in the sack. I would knock those envoys' heads together and send their masters a challenge to provide regiments against Cæsar or against me, whichever suits their temper best! That might not be the best course. You can manage your poultry-yard better without me. Nevertheless, you are my friend. I will serve you first and take what comes of it. But I must serve you in my own way, and I must have more men."

Again he rapped the parchment on the table. He seemed to wish to call attention to it, but the sight of it suggested no solution of the problem to Caswallon's worried brain.

"You forget I am an admiral of Cæsar's fleet!"

Caswallon stared and Orwic laughed. Sigurdsen grumbled below his breath, being superstitious about writings in a language he could not read. Fflur leaned back, drumming jeweled fingers on the table.

"Much good a writing will do! There is no seal on it," said Orwic. "Cæsar will have sent long ago to all the ports to warn them that the parchment is a forgery and—"

There was a small wooden box on the table. Tros struck it with the roll of parchment.

"Perhaps—and let us hope—that Cæsar forgets, as you forgot, that when I took his bireme, there was not only his treasure in the well below the cabin, but his seal and a great stack of his private documents. There lies the seal." He struck the box again. "A fool maybe I am, but no such fool as Cæsar thinks. He smiled when we had him prisoner. He thought he could bribe me, and he knew we would never kill him, for fear his own men would retaliate and kill Fflur. He offered to make me admiral of his fleet if I would desert Caswallon. And he smiled again when I made him write me the appointment.

"Cæsar was fool enough to think me fool enough to believe that appointment valid without the seal. But I have the seal! He thought me fool enough to believe that he will not close all the ports of

Gaul against me and set a big price on my head. He forgot, or else he never knew, that I have his private correspondence, that I know who his friends are in Rome, and who are his enemies. The thought never entered the calculating brain of Cæsar, that I will go to Rome and there, it may be, break the wheels of his ambition!"

"Rome?" Fflur muttered. "Rome!"

She seemed to be seeing visions.

"If he has any brains at all, he will have written to Rome," said Orwic.

"Not about me! Not Cæsar! I know him. He will count on catching me up to some trick on the coast of Gaul, or possibly in Hispania, at any rate this side of the Gates of Hercules. In the first place, Cæsar's popularity depends on his personal renown. Were it known he was taken prisoner and forced to exchange himself for a British chief's wife, whom he had stolen against all the laws of embassy, there is a man named Cato in Rome who would leap at the opportunity to denounce him before the Senate. Moreover, by appointing me an admiral Cæsar usurped the Senate's privilege. He is on the horns of a dilemma. If he will keep the story secret of his having stolen a king's wife by dishonorable trickery and of having returned her in exchange for himself and an appointment that he had no right to make, he must keep silence and watch for me as cats watch mouse-holes. He knows I build a ship, but he does not know how big a ship or how sea-worthy, because Caswallon slew his spies. It will never enter Cæsar's head that I will go swiftly to Rome."

"Rome!" Fflur said again. She sat up straight and stared at him.

"Aye, Rome! Where Cæsar's masters are and Cæsar's enemies. Where the moneylenders live, Crassus, greatest of them all. Where Pompey, Cæsar's friend in name, broods jealousy against him. Rome, where Cato lives, who hates usurpers, and would rather break a spoke of Cæsar's wheel than eat his dinner. I will sail through the Gates of Hercules, drop anchor in the port of Ostia, proceed to Rome and do there what I can to ruin Cæsar's prospect of invading Britain. If I were you—" Tros leaned forward, elbow on the table, pointing with the parchment at Caswallon—"I would tell those kings' ambassadors to go home. I would bid them say to their masters that you prefer to try to save all Britain without their aid, since they ask to be paid to save themselves. That should set them thinking. It should make them more ashamed than if you plead. Then, if my mission fails and Cæsar invades Britain later in the year in spite of me, you will be no worse off than you are now, and perhaps they will offer assistance instead of asking to be bought."

Caswallon shook his head.

"They would plan to weaken me," he said, "by waiting until I take the brunt of the invasion. Later, if Cæsar should have too much the best of it, they would probably send men. But those same men would force me to pay the bill when they had driven Cæsar out of Britain. I would very likely have to abdicate."

"Cross that river when you reach it," Tros suggested. "You gain nothing by promising payment now. You will only whet the edge of their cupidity. The high hand in a bargain is the hand that wins, and the gods love him who plays the man. Be daring!"

Fflur leaned back again, her eyes half closed, her fingers again drumming on the table.

"You—you would dare anything."

"Except to take me with him!" Orwic interrupted. "But he shall! I enjoy Tros. He reminds me of the northeast wind."

"But we," Fflur went on, "we have two whole tribes to think of. Caswallon is king of the Trinobantes, and the Cantii pay him tribute. It is they who will suffer unless we can form an alliance with other tribes against Cæsar."

"Suffer!" Tros struck the table with his fist. "Show me freedom that must not be fought for! Make you ready for the fight and let those kings' ambassadors go home with good proud answers for their kings, who then may find some manhood in themselves before the war begins! They come here to eat and drink your provender, designing tribute from your purse, when they ought to be offering money and men. If they go home and raise no regiments, and if you raise all you can, and if I throw a stick in Cæsar's wheel so that he can't invade you, then, I think those cousin kings of yours may have to learn who kings it over them in Britain!

"If Cæsar were to beat you he would trample on them, too, wouldn't he? If Cæsar were only to weaken you, you say they would rub it in by taxing you for whatever scraps of aid they might have brought in the nick of time. Well and good. If Cæsar doesn't come, but if you have made ready for him, you will be strong. I am no advocate of conquests. I abominate them. But I believe in making my debtor pay whatever bill he owes. If I were in your shoes when that day comes, I would make those cousin kings pay through the nose for having saved them all from Cæsar! There would be no taxes for a while in my domain, but such heavy ones in theirs as should keep them from growing bumptious!"

Fflur smiled and shook her head.

"Caswallon is too easy going. He is more likely to send them help in famine-time than to remember grudges."

She was not looking at her husband, and when he crashed his great fist on the table she turned her head away to hide a smile.

"Mother of my sons!" he exploded. "How often must I tell you that a king of Britain has to steer his course with two-score councilors pulling him this and that way! The only man of all my council whom I can trust always to vote with me is Orwic. And now Orwic says he sails with Tros! Can't you, won't you see, that if I give these ambassadors a manly answer, my own council will accuse me of hotheadedness and will oppose whatever next I want to do?"

"I see that Tros is right," Fflur answered. "And you can get along very well without Orwic."

Orwic came out of his ostentatious boredom long enough to look surprised.

"Orwic only irritates the council by supporting you whether you are right or wrong, and by being too young to have any right to your confidence. If Orwic goes, there will be rivalry to win your favor and you can swing the council any way you please."

"I see my end! I surely go with Tros," said Orwic, hiding chagrin beneath a mask of mannerly good humor. "No more sitting all day long between fat landholders and listening to speeches that would send a weasel to sleep! No more all-night sittings to decide whether girls without doweries are lawful seizin, or who shall pay for the bridge on Durwhern * road! I visit Rome with Tros. Then what will happen, Tros, if you're wrong and the world turns out to be triangular? When we reach one of the corners, and suppose it

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* The modern Canterbury.

sticks up in the air, like that, will the ship go tumbling down the other side, or, suppose there isn't any water, what then?"

Caswallon interrupted gloomily—

"I must summon the council—"

"To hear my resignation?" Orwic asked, amused at his own conceit.

"—before I can safely answer these ambassadors. Tros, brother Tros, I think you had better speak before the council. They will resent the intrusion, but it is just possible you might convince them. I know I can't. They wouldn't even vote me an army when Cæsar's men stole Fflur. They offered money for Fflur's ransom. They will offer money now, with which to buy protection against Cæsar from a company of kings, who will make the weather an excuse for breaking bargains when the time comes! Will you speak to them?"

Tros nodded. Fflur drew in her breath.

"I will be there!" remarked Orwic. "You could no more sleep through a speech by Tros than you could after a dose of druids' physic! Why not let Tros talk, too, to those ambassadors in the big hall? I would love to listen!"

"If we are not careful," said Fflur, "the council will want to inquire into Tros's ship-building. There has been trouble already because he has used so many blacksmiths, and has raised the price of food in Lunden by employing so many men in one place. They will want to tax his ship, and they will ask what is to become of all the blacksmiths when the ship is finished. Moreover, when you and Tros came to rescue me in Gaul, you brought nearly two hundred charcoal-burners with you, and they never returned.

"The council blame Tros for the charcoal shortage. They are afraid to go to Tros's shipyard and make trouble there, because of the burning stinkballs that Eough the sorcerer taught him how to make. But if Tros appears before the council, with too much strong advice, some one is sure to accuse him of sorcery and of trouble making and intrigue and what-not else."

"They accuse him already!" Caswallon laughed. "But they can't get away from the fact that Taliesan favored him, and that it was Tros who wrecked Cæsar's fleet when Cæsar invaded Kent."

"The druids have lost influence since Taliesan died," Fflur answered. "Men are saying Taliesan was the last who knew the Mysteries, and that now the whole company of druids is like sheep without a shepherd. As for Cæsar's fleet, there are plenty who say it was not Tros at all but the wind that destroyed it. Several women have told me that their husbands are saying Tros lied."

Caswallon sat bolt upright.

"Which women? Whose husbands?" he demanded. "I will deal with those husbands! I will wager they are men who skulked in bed while the rest of us were fighting Romans on the beach! Let me think now. Was one of them—"

"No names!" said Fflur. "The women will tell me nothing more if I betray their confidences. But I think it will be best if Tros keeps away from the council. Let him finish his ship and sail away and do what he can for us in Rome, leaving us to manage this corner of Britain."

Tros offered no demurrer. He had faith in Fflur's intuition, even though she had not foreseen that Cæsar's messengers would take her prisoner; even though she had not prevented Helma from trying to escape and so being shot by the Roman guards. He knew intuition works by fits and starts. And besides, she proposed what he wanted to do, which was argument enough.

"I will finish my ship," he answered. "Fflur is right. I will attend to my own business. Purge you those ambassadors and manage your council how you can. Is supper late, or is my belly out of time from too much talking?"

Fflur leaned back again and studied him from under lowered eyelids.

"Out of time, I think," she said at last. "Taliesan used to say, the proper time at which to do things is as important as the things we do. I think you will not see Rome until—"

"Until I have a crew!" Tros interrupted. "Men! I need men!"

"Patience! You need patience, until the right time," Fflur said quietly.

CHAPTER LIII

GATHERING CLOUDS

Captains need men's obedience. He is no captain whose commands men disobey. Nor is he fit to be a captain whose heart loveth not rebellion and rebels. For of what is he captain, if not first of his own self? Can he captain himself without rebellion against ten thousand laws, traditions, superstitions, tyrannies, lacks, stupidities, sloth, cravings, ignorance and ten times ten thousand efforts to compel him to obey whatever terror hath a following of fools? He is a rebel, or no captain. In rebellion he learns. His knowledge commands obedience of men in whom growth stirs, but who know not yet what stirs them. It is not obedience they hate, but the indignity of aimless living. Their rebellion is evidence of fitness to be led. Let him look to it whither he leads.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Soon—Tros had promised himself. But it was early spring. Britons had a thousand activities that they preferred to hauling choice lumber for him or to letting their wives weave sail-cloth and twist cordage. While winter lasted they were satisfied to have a ready market for almost anything they cared to sell in the way of labor, material or provender. But as soon as the snow melted and the warm wind brought rain that made the tree-buds swell, they began to think of farms, the breeding of cattle and horses and, not least, the surging in their own veins that made any kind of steady work for some one else unthinkable. So difficulties dogged the heels of unforeseen delay.

Tros's ship, with the ribs of Cæsar's broken and dismantled bireme on the mud beside her, still rested in her cradle on the ways, her underbody gleaming like a mirror when the sun shone. Tros had coated her with tin, an innovation daring as it was original, and an extravagance that irritated Britons almost as much as his capture of a whole shipload of the expensive metal had exasperated Cæsar. True, the British owners of the tin received their purchase price, because Cæsar had had to pay it against a document that bore his signature; but if Tros had plated the whole ship with gold he could hardly have created more jealousy and adverse comment.

Tin was wealth, the one sure article of commerce that the Britons always could exchange for foreign goods, the stuff in which ransoms were paid. Ingots of it, shaped like knuckle-bones, were easier to trade than minted money.

It was no use Tros explaining that a smooth, unweeded surface would increase the ship's speed, and that speed meant safety. They bade him stay on land and use the tin for making bronze shields, wheels and weapons; or to buy a farm with half of it and store the rest against an evil day. In vain he showed them pier-piles that had been exposed to tide-water. They retorted that if his ship grew rotten he could build a new one, whereas tin was almost priceless and much harder to obtain than lumber.

Caswallon's council, angry with the king because on Tros's advice he had returned a stiff-necked answer to those other kings' ambassadors, now fanned the flame of irritation by questioning the advisability of permitting Tros to finish a ship that he would certainly use against Cæsar, thus providing the Romans with additional excuse for an invasion. Had they not lost enough young men already on the Kentish beach? Was it respectful to the gods, or sane men's policy, to increase the already serious risk of war?

Some said that the gods, and Lud particularly, on the bosom of whose River Thames the great ship would be launched, would certainly resent the barbarous impiety of wasting honest tin below the water level. Floods might follow. Usually pestilence came in the wake of flood. A prevalence of northeast winds might bring successive raids of Northmen. There were a hundred likely ways in which the gods might wreak a vengeance; and there was no longer any Taliesan to whom to go for spiritual succor.

In the end they appealed to the druids, on whom the majority still felt they might depend for light on their perplexity. But the druids had lost their own faith in themselves with astonishing suddenness since Taliesan's great soul departed for another world. They returned evasive answers, of which any man might make his own interpretation, thus increasing doubt without condemning Tros nor yet supporting him.

They hinted that he had cut down far too many oak trees, on which grew the sacred mistletoe, and they made guarded remarks about his misuse of the sacred yew to form springs for his long-range arrow-engines, but they declined to interfere in matters that concerned king and council rather than themselves, since, said they, no emergency existed.

The usual gossipers grew busy. The men who, in all ages and in any land, seek always to destroy and to prevent by innuendo without risking their own skins, stirred indignation in the minds of ignorant men who knew nothing of church or state but were easily flattered and easily persuaded that the fate of Britain rested in their hands. There were riots outside the shipyard. Men came by night to set fire to his ship, to the lumber piles, the forge and workshops. Tros had to disperse the mob three times in one week by burning quantities of his stenching chemical. The spluttering stench saved ship and buildings, and after the third demonstration of the stuff's effectiveness there was no more open violence; but the charge of sorcery against Tros became as easy to lay as it was difficult to disprove.

Sorcery meant excommunication by the druids first, and then impeachment before king and council if any one could be found with courage to take the first step along with the responsibility. Conviction would be tantamount to outlawry, since any man might slay such an offender without risk of punishment.

None did come forward to insist on an impeachment, because of the law that allowed revenge to the accused in the event that he should win a favorable verdict, and because it was known that Caswallon befriended Tros, but mere suspicion of sorcery was enough to cause a boycott of the shipyard; and even Tros's own slaves began to shirk their work as something never destined to be finished.

The Northmen were a superstitious lot, all forty-eight of them. They could gloom like the gray of a Baltic twilight. It had leaked out that Tros had told Sigurdsen the world was round and that he meant to sail around it. Sigurdsen was drunk at Helma's funeral and revealed the secret. They were seamen, who did not mind drunkenness, raiding and looting and the usual concomitants of war. Nor did they pray too often or admire the character of men who did.

But to talk, even in secret, of sailing around the world was altogether too much like blasphemy, even for their strong stomachs. If they could have believed the theory it would have been, in their opinion, irreligious and indecent to discuss it. But to spiritual blasphemy was added temporal danger, since they knew, as everybody always had known, that the world was flat and over its distant rim the sea poured into eternal darkness.

So they spoke of Tros's obsession in gloomy undertones and at night, when they gathered around the fire in their own snug quarters, they conjectured what would happen when they should reach the world's rim and be caught in the undertow of the eternal waterfall. Could men approach Valhalla by that route? Or would their souls go tumbling forever downward into dark oblivion? The problem interfered with work and let to grosser superstition.

Some of them had seen the havoc wrought in Cæsar's camp by the hot stinkballs. They knew Eough had taught Tros. Eough was a sorcerer. They had seen the mixture burn with its appalling stench when Tros dispersed the rioters. True, they had seen the yellow crystals brought from under the horse-manure below Caswallon's stable, and they knew the rest was sulphur, charcoal, resin and plain sawdust. But it stood to reason no such mixture had any right to explode unless the devils of the underworld had been involved in it. So far the infernal stuff had only harmed their enemies, but it might just as easily reverse its energy and suffocate themselves.

"With a stink from the caverns of hell he loads the ship, and into hell he proposes to plunge us, ship and all, when we reach the world's edge," Sigurdsen confided, staring at the embers on the hearth. "No luck can come of such dark business. Tros had the best of it against the Romans that time, but look you what happened. Was his own wife Helma not the first one to be slain, and she expecting child?"

The Britons—rebels, criminals, homeless vagabonds, slaves, hated the sea and everything in or on it, except the fish. Homeless, except for Tros's long labor sheds; hopeless, except for Tros's good-will; inevitably outlawed, should they dare to run away, and with nothing but Tros between them and a far worse servitude, they dreaded nonetheless to leave their little corner of the earth and were already homesick at the thought of it.

Glendwyr had changed his mind about serving Tros as a free man, but he had not been taken into confidence. However, he had overheard the Northmen talking, and the secrets that a man learns that way are a lot more mentally disturbing than the facts he truly knows.

He approached Tros, down under the ship one night when Tros was searching with a lantern to make sure no undetected visitor had set some heap of shavings smoldering. There had been a dozen attempts to sneak into the yard at twilight and destroy the wooden ways.

"Lord Tros," said Glendwyr, speaking manfully, for new-won freedom sat like a god between his shoulder-blades, "I have a thought that would do you no injury if you should listen to it."

"Speak your mind," said Tros, "and if you change mine you shall have the credit."

But he went on swinging the lantern, poking into corners with a long stick, not suggesting much alacrity of vacillation.

Glendwyr hesitated. It is not so easy to talk confidences to a man whose back is turned, bent forward, hunting danger in the drafty darkness. It was not until a gust of east wind blew the lantern out and Tros had to find the fire-pot and relight it, that Glendwyr's thought took form in words.

"Lord Tros, you have a great ship here, but a crew too small, that will never serve you well unless—"

"Unless I know how to make them, eh? That shall be my task," said Tros, and the lantern light shone yellow on his stubborn face as he stooped to replace the horn cylinder around the flaxen wick.

"Unless, Lord Tros, their numbers should be increased and they should have work that they understand."

"Do they understand full bellies, the whip for laziness, freedom for good behavior?" Tros asked, and he went on poking into corners.

"Lord Tros, they have been told you will sail first to Rome, and they have heard that the Romans will put them into an arena for sport and watch them being torn by wild beasts. It is not easy to encourage men who have that fear in them."

"I notice you try to discourage me," Tros answered, but his back was turned. He was noticing the rain, remembering whether all deck openings were covered. "You have a project of your own. What is it?"

He walked away, and Glendwyr had to follow.

"No project, but a word of advice, Lord Tros."

Tros climbed the ladder up the ship's side, and stood on the long, wet deck observing that the watchmen had sought shelter from the rain. He ordered Glendwyr to go and rout them out from under the hatch coverings.

"Warn them that if I should catch them skulking there will be whippings! Cuff them about the head, and tell them they are lucky it was you, not I, who walked the rounds!"

He returned down the ladder and examined the magazine where he had stored his chemical. There presently young Glendwyr joined him.

"Now, if there were a raid in view, Lord Tros—some chance to prove themselves against a weaker adversary, with the hope of plunder—"

He stopped, because at last Tros turned and faced him, holding up the lantern. Its rays showed slanting rain that blew in squalls between them, dripping from their tarred hoods. Glendwyr's expression began to suggest nervousness, which made him look older than Tros, although he was several years the younger.

"You seek to prove your value," Tros remarked, moving the lantern the better to see Glendwyr's face. "But if you know my crew is undependable, be you the stouter-hearted against the day when we must depend on them."

"Lord Tros, I only sought—"

"To make a pirate of me! To make of me a rogue like Cæsar! To persuade me to attack some harmless folk against whom I have neither grudge nor ground, except my own ability to hit and run! Mark this, now. When I need advice, I open up my thought and let the gods pour wisdom in. From you I ask such loyalty as a ship yields to the helm. And mark this, too. Remember it. When a pinch comes, as it will, if the Britons in my crew act shamefully, you will not go blameless, since you are one of them, and yet a free man and my officer."

Tros strode away, swinging the lantern, toward his own snug quarters that had been lonelier than a hermit's cave since Helma died. He had set the slave-girl free who used to wait on his young wife, and the girl had vanished, none knew whither. Conops had resumed old ways, enacting all parts, cook, bed-chamber valet, serving-man, sword-sharpener, factotum, confidant. The hut was all ship-shape and neat, where Helma had kept house with satisfying woman touches that a man does not notice much until he has to live again without them.

As Tros entered, standing like a great bear in the doorway, rain dripping from his bearskin coat and from his tarred hood, Conops viewed the wooden floor with pride, for he had scrubbed and sanded it. The heavy woolen carpet Helma laid had been removed. Benches, stools, chests and the armchair made from an oaken cask, stood in rigidly straight lines against the walls and even the sticks on the clay hearth were laid with parallel precision.

The expression on Conops' one-eyed face was pertly loyal, asserting what even his privileged lips hardly dared to frame in words—

"You and I, master, are men who need no women to make life soft for us!"

And it was true. Tros knew it. In his heart there was an empty place that he had never known of until Helma filled it, and he had hardly realized it even so until a Roman arrow robbed him of her. Now he understood that she had filled it all too well, and the recluse in him, inherited from his austere old sire, closed such a wall around her memory as not another woman in the world should ever penetrate. He had made his mind up finally on that score.

He threw his bearskin off and sat down in the cask-armchair more resolute than ever, devoid of appetite, although Conops tempted him with beans and venison, not more than sipping at the mug of warm mead, conscious that the memory of Helma fretted him—he could almost feel her presence in the room—and so more careful to control himself. Emotions such as thoughts of Helma carried in their wake, he shunned. He must find hard stuff to bite on, and quite suddenly he thought of it.

"Lives Skell?" he asked.

He had forgotten Skell.

"Aye, the red rascal lives," said Conops. "His eyes are as red as his beard now, from peeping through the drafty chinks, and because for pity's sake we let him have a fire and there is no hole in the prison roof, so the smoke can't escape any better than he can. He eats as much as ever, and though I don't doubt he has stiffened in his fetters, there are no sores. We let him have fish-oil for wrists and ankles, and he thrives like a fat toad in a hole."

"Strike off his fetters. Bring him here," Tros ordered. And then, to please Conops, fell to at the food.

A half-hour later, for they had to find a blacksmith to cut through the fetter rivets, Conops and a guard of Britons brought Skell to the door.

"Bring him in. Dismiss the guard," Tros ordered, and Skell stood before him, red-eyed, with his red beard tangled into knots, holding his wrists as if a weight still hung from them and reeking of the fish-oil. Skell said nothing, which might or might not prove that he had learned a little wisdom in the solitary darkness of the prison hut.

"You poor trickster, you puzzle me!" Tros remarked when he had stared at him a long time. "I can understand a whole rogue, who acts generously on occasion for the sake of some one else. You, when the gods provide you opportunity to play a man's part, play it with one hand only, using the other against yourself. If you should save my life, I could not trust you not to try to kill me the next minute! Speak."

"What shall I say?" Skell answered.

"Oho! So is it! We have learned a little shame, have we! Have fetters done to you what liberality could not? Do you feel like a leper at last, and would like to like yourself?"

"Whatever I say, you will not believe," Skell retorted, and his chin was, it may be, a trifle higher than he used to hold it when a bold man looked him in the face.

Tros crashed his fist down on the table with force enough to drive a nail into the oak.

"Pluto! Who are you to say what I believe or disbelieve! You poor fool! If you knew your own mind half as well as you think you can read another's, I might feel some respect for you!"

"I know my own mind," Skell said, and his lips closed tight over his teeth. His red-rimmed eyes looked straight at Tros.

"Well, well! Reveal yourself! I listen."

Tros threw his weight back in the chair and drummed with the fingers of his left hand on a heavy, jeweled sword-hilt.

"I would rather be killed," said Skell, "than to continue living, unless my future holds more than the past. I didn't ask to come into the world. Or, if I did, I don't remember it. My mother was a British slave, but my father a free Northman, so, though I was not born free, I was set free before I was old enough to know the difference. You would think a freed man would have equal rights with others. But not so. I was known as Skell, the bastard. And I tell you, Lord Tros, I have had to use my wits to come by such small standing as I did have when you first knew me, until I was caught in the Glendwyr rebellion and enslaved and turned over to you like one of the steers men pay to the king in lieu of taxes. Such training as mine was, such self-defense against the Britons' clannishness and such expedients to gain riches as the only way to recognition—birth having been denied me—make a liar of a man. Lord Tros, I daresay you would be a liar if you had had half my difficulties.

"You don't know what it means, Lord Tros, to feel that free men hate or despise you, and slaves regard you as one of themselves by right, only a bit more fortunate! Your equals claim a superiority that carks and galls, and you can't break through the wall they raise. So you turn false, as much from hopelessness as from any other reason. I know I did.

"I lent money, deprived men of their land. I played spy for the Romans long before Cæsar ever thought of trying his invasion. I made men fear me whenever I could and however I could, and I betrayed them when it suited me. I would have betrayed those rebels whom I persuaded to rise against Caswallon if I had had time. But I was caught too soon, lost everything, and since then I have been your slave. Slavery did not sweeten my disposition. But of late I have been thinking in the dark.

"Lord Tros, it takes time for a man to change himself. I have a habit, like a fox, of having always one hole in reserve, one back way out of everything. If I see a profit to myself and to another, instinct makes me keep another secret course clear, to which I can turn at a moment's notice in order to wreck that other man. I have learned to trust nobody, because I knew none trusted me.

"But now I have done with all that, and if it is too late, I am sorry. But I have done with it. I can't change in a minute or a month. I can't make you believe me, and I won't try. But I have told the truth."

"By Zeus, I think you have! Is it the first time?" Tros asked.

"No. I told the truth to your wife—who they tell me is dead—here in this house."

Tros leaned forward, chin on hand, elbow on the table.

"Careful!" he warned. "If you lie now, your last chance is gone! What said my wife Helma?"

"That if I would prove my good faith, she would be my friend."

"And you, she having said that, knowing of the Roman's plot to carry her to Gaul, said nothing?"

"Yes. I tell you a man can not change in a moment."

"And now you ask me—"

"I ask nothing!" Skell interrupted. "You sent for me. You said to me, 'Speak.' I have spoken."

Tros leaned back again, the lids half-lowered over his amber eyes.

"I think you have spoken truth," he said at last. "And yet one swallow makes no summer. You have been a crafty liar in your day, Skell, and it may be now that you tell truth craftily, with hidden purposes behind that mask of yours. You and I—we are master and slave. What is your thought about that?"

They breathed a dozen breaths before Skell answered:

"It is the law. You own me. But as to the right and wrong of it, though I have owned slaves, I confess I don't know."

"Then I will tell you," said Tros. "The past is like a stream that turned the mill, and there are men who live in the past who float downstream and drown. Such men are slaves. The way to keep from drowning is to swim ashore. The shore is duty. And you are fortunate in that you have but one duty, whereas I have many. There are many men dependent on me, and you have one master to serve. I never sell slaves. I give them freedom when they earn it, but I make them prove to me their right to enjoy freedom, knowing that unless they have it in them to serve me faithfully they will never know enough to serve themselves. I do not bestow freedom as a reward. That is not my province.

"I have not sufficient impudence to try to usurp God's prerogative. But when I see a man, my slave by law, responsible to me, by acts, not mouthing of mock-loyalty, revealing manhood in himself, I know at once that man is fit for freedom. Skell, may my right hand betray me if I rob a man of anything I know is his! When you are fit for freedom you shall go free on the instant.

He was watching Skell's face, scanning it as, on a poop at sea, he scanned the weather, leaving intuition to interpret what the eye observed. Skell spoke again—

"Lord Tros, it is not easy for a proud man to accept slavery."

"I know nothing in life worth doing that is easy!" Tros retorted. "I think when we are dead we rest a while. Until then—work, with spells of sleep, in which our friends the gods pour into us such wisdom as our work has made us fit to hold!"

"I am persuaded," Skell said quietly.

"Fool! I seek not to persuade you!" Tros sat up again and laid his great fist on the table. "You asked the way, like a man who is lost in the dark. I told it. Take or leave it! But as long as you are my slave, I will do my duty and demand obedience. I own your body. Nothing less than your own soul can unlock that barrier to freedom."

"I am persuaded, nevertheless," Skell answered.

It annoyed Tros to be told he had persuaded anybody. Adept at persuasion, by the very force of his own passion to decide all issues for himself, he liked to think that other men could judge as definitely as himself, and when they yielded he preferred to think they had seen eye to eye with him unaided.

"Well, take warning. Try not to persuade me!" he retorted. "It is I who will decide whether you are fit for freedom, if ever that time comes. You are released from prison. Take care lest I have to lock you in again. Conops, give Skell the key of the hut he used to occupy, restore his name to the muster-roll, class him among the Northmen, and put him to work at dawn on rigging the main shrouds. Fall away. Shut the door after you."

CHAPTER LIV

FFLUR PAYS A DEBT

Believing as I do that Dignity is the noblest attainment in this life, I refused a kingdom. I am free to obey my vision and to die pursuing it, in treaty with none, aiding and abetting whom I will. That purple cloak I wear, that angers kings, serves not unhandsomely to keep in mind my vow. And I have sworn no other vow than this, that no king could observe though a thousand priests should anoint him with all the holy oil on earth:

I will fight for the weak against the strong, and for the lesser tyranny against the greater, until my Soul shall show me wiser wisdom. Without wisdom, dignity is a lying mask. Without courage, wisdom is the solemn vaporing of clowns.

I saw not fit to couzen me a kingdom and be catspaw for the rogues. I see a war worth winning.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

THERE was not much Caswallon dared to do to relieve the boycott on the shipyard. Tros was forced to send small boats up-river, two and even three days' journey, to trade for provisions. His hired blacksmiths deserted, and he, with his own hand, had to teach selected slaves the anvil work and such odds and ends of casting as remained to do.

Then there were the huge and complicated catapults to set in place, with double uprights rising thirty feet above the deck, from the top of which ton-weights of lead fell on to basketwork cushions below the waterline, providing force for the projection of the hot stinkballs along a trough that could be moved for elevation and direction.

Last, but not least, there were provisions for a voyage to be accumulated. He would have to start shorthanded, but even so he had a crew of two hundred and fifty men to provide for. There was deer meat to be smoked, and fish; wheat by the ton; turnips, carrots and dried apples that Fflur showed him how to prepare and that the druids said would help to prevent scurvy; mutton, beef and hog meat to be salted down; tallow by the hogshead, for a ship needs grease as fire needs fuel; charcoal for the cooking; medicines begged from the druids, who according to their law might not refuse, but who stipulated, nevertheless, that Tros should be gone before midsummer day.

He held out for more than medicines before he struck that bargain with them. As any looker-on with half an eye could see, the druids were fallen from their high estate since the great Lord Druid Taliesan departed to another world. Ambition had developed. There were rival factions for the leadership, some seeking to increase their influence by cautiously intriguing with the kings, some on the other hand plotting to weaken the kings that their own authority might be greater, but all agreed on one point—Tros was dangerous, because he knew too much.

He went to interview their spokesmen in a sun-warmed clearing where great stones stood in a circle far within an oak forest. That interview seemed barren of results, but later they came to see him in the shipyard, secretly at night, lest men should say they were condoning sorcery. They offered medicines and some instructions how to use them, and they smiled when Tros made heavier demands, because they knew he intended to leave Britain in any event.

But Caswallon had advised Tros, and Fflur had seconded, with her usual gray-eyed insight into how to manage men.

"You are going to Rome to seek peace for us Britons," said Fflur. "It is fair we should pay for it, but it is not fair that this corner of Britain should pay all the price, or nearly all. The other tribes are just as much concerned as we are."

"Aye, but whoever can make them pay has genius!" Caswallon snorted.

"The druids have already made them pay," Fflur answered. "They, we, all of us have paid the druids ten times over for much more than they will ever do. It was all right when Taliesan lived. He was a true Lord Druid and none grudged the tithe of gold and pearls. Whoever had pearls, gave of his own free will the greatest. Whoever had gold, gave a tenth. So the druids are rich."

"And they will pay you to go if you can make them believe you will not go otherwise," Caswallon commented. But he said it in a low voice, as if afraid of his own words. Himself, he would never have dared to offer an affront to any druid, not even to a druid who he knew was false to the druidic teachings, for he was Celtic to the marrow of his bones, as meek in the presence of spiritual teachers as he was fierce in battle.

So Tros spoke cavalierly to the druids.

"I will not go," he assured them, "unless you do your part. Rather I will launch my ship and raid Cæsar's ports as it suits me, using British harbors for a base. That will bring Cæsar the sooner, so we can have it out with him and learn which way the gods decide the fate of Britain."

The druids shuddered at the very name of Cæsar, knowing well what fate he would impose on them. When spiritual vision wanes and temporal ambition takes the place of it, men flinch from being burned alive in baskets. Compromise creeps into their convictions.

"Pearls!" said Tros. "You have. Rome covets. I can not compel Rome, but I can buy Cæsar's enemies. I could buy all Rome except perhaps one man, if I had pearls enough."

"Who told you we have pearls?" a druid asked.

"The same one who told me the world is round! I, I, myself! I know it!"

Long into a mystic night in May they argued, seated in the shed where Tros had stored his horrible explosive. Barrels of the stuff were all around them; barrels and great lead balls, as yet unfilled. Their white robes gleamed ghostly in the moonlight streaming through the open door, where Conops sat on guard against intruders. Tros looked like a great black bear among them, growling from the deepest shadow.

"What if we give you pearls? What proof have we how you will use them?"

"None!" he answered. "Read ye your own hearts. I have read mine for you."

"If you fail?"

"Then blame the gods, not me! I, Tros, have spoken. I will add no word to it. With pearls—" he pulled off his black tarred cap and held it out toward them—"this full of pearls, I will go to Rome and try to put a stick in Cæsar's wheel. Without pearls I will stay here and let come what may."

The night after that they brought pearls to him, a dozen huge ones in a small gold casket lined with fleece, and more than a thousand of mixed sizes in a woolen bag. He tossed the treasure into the bronze box that had once been Cæsar's money-chest and slammed the lid down, giving them no inkling that, except for those pearls, the chest was now almost empty.

"Let the gods say whether that is price enough," he commented. "The gods know what and why you pay. The gods will judge what I do. Now I would advise you, speed the parting guest! Bid all men aid instead of hindering the launching of my ship!"

So, subtly the druids began to change the mental atmosphere until Tros actually suffered from embarrassment of riches in the form of unskilled labor and unsuitable supplies.

Instead of boycotting, men brought him all the trash they did not need—the moldy grain, sick oxen to be killed and salted down, old horses for the same ungraceful fate, discouraged-looking slaves devoid of teeth or suffering from ague, who they said would make fine rowers; spoiled honey, hides half full of holes, moth-eaten woolen cloth, and all the odds and ends they had no use for, eagerly demanding money, and annoyed when Tros refused it.

There was nearly another riot. Tros was charged with cheating, by a noisy mob that refused to take its rubbish home again and called the judges of the land to witness he was liable for damages from rain and theft. Caswallon had to call out all his bodyguard, to use spear-butts and to charge into the crowd with chariots that had wooden staves set to the axle-hubs in place of the murderous scythes.

Then, two weeks before the date set for the launching, one last effort by the powers that impede men's plans—blunt mutiny! Tros's slaves, aware that nothing else could save them from a life at sea, deserted by night in a body, and before Tros could prevent, some Jack-of-anybody's-business-but-his-own had fired the beacons and set bells a-ringing to alarm the countryside. That meant proscription. Every fugitive was outlawed from the moment the desertion became public news, a price by law on each deserter's head, payable by the owner to whoever the captor might be; one-third of the fugitive's market value if brought in alive, or, if dead, one-tenth of it.

So a hunt began, with all the countryside in arms and no hope there would not be bloodshed. Tros did not dare to remove his Northmen from the shipyard without first making some other provision for guarding it. So he mounted horseback, an expedient that with all his sailor's heart he loathed, and rode full-gallop to Caswallon's house on Lud's Hill, falling, as the sun rose, in the mixen of the horseyard when the weary brute came to a halt too suddenly.

Caswallon was up betimes, for he had heard the clamor of the alarm bells, but he proved a sorry comforter, smiling behind his hand while half-a-dozen grooms removed the stable stuff from Tros's cloak.

"You will get about half of your slaves back, probably—at so much each. I will instruct the judge. He shall assess you lightly. The dead ones won't cost anything to speak of."

It was Fflur who solved the difficulty. She came to the great front porch where the swallows were all nesting and the men and women already waited who had favors to ask of the king, winding up her long braids and calling to the grooms to bring her chariot.

"Fie!" she called out to Caswallon. "Laggard! Talking while the ricks burn! Lay a false scent quickly. Then clap your own pack on the right trail!"

"Fflur is always right!" Caswallon muttered. The words had grown into a formula from so much repetition, although he did not always recognize her rightness until after the event.

And then came Glendwyr, riding a mud-bespattered, foaming horse to death, vaulting as the beast fell, finishing the last three hundred yards on foot.

"Lord Tros, they have gone westward. They—"

He could not speak for gasping. But no need. Caswallon knew.

"Horns!" he exploded. "Trumpets! Fifty mounted men! The rally! All directions! Hurry the crowd downriver! Tell them Tros's slaves are making in a body for the woods beyond the Medway!"

Never on earth were finer horsemen than the Britons. Give them leave to show off, and they had four legs beneath them faster than the partridges take wing from stubble fields. The silver horns and trumpets split the morning air as hoofs went thundering through the gate and, fanwise, fifty of Caswallon's gentlemen-at-arms rode belly-to-the-earth to round up groups of searchers and view-hallow them eastward in the wrong direction.

"Runnimede!" Glendwyr panted.

Caswallon nodded. It was a far cry to the swamps by Runnimede where desperate men too frequently outwore the patience of the pursuers. He had already ordered out the chariots. To the summons of a golden bugle more than a hundred bow-and-arrow men turned out, making up the whole force of the standing army. Twenty more breaths, and already four white stallions pawed the air as the king's own chariot came to a plunging halt in front of him. He jumped in, seizing the reins from the charioteer.

"I caught one," said Glendwyr, recovering his breath at last. "He had returned to steal an ax. He nearly slew me with it."

"Lives he?" Tros demanded.

"Aye, you will need him for the oar-work."

Tros suppressed a smile. He foresaw that he had a good lieutenant in the making. However, too much praise turns willing heads.

"What then?"

"I tripped and tied him. Conops came, put a handful of salt in his mouth, showed him water. He soon told where the rest had gone."

Fflur's chariot was seesawing behind two red Icenian mares that squealed for exercise, she reining them with one hand as she stood with a foot on the low seat balancing herself, and watched the five-and-twenty war-machines, whose stallions squealed and bit each other, rearing as their drivers formed them into five lines, four men to a chariot.

"Why do we wait?" Caswallon asked.

Tros jumped in. Glendwyr followed. Then Orwic came, driving uphill from the direction of Lud's bridge, his handsome face alight with the fun of living at top speed, swinging his chariot on one wheel at the gallop and then backing until, hub by hub, he was in line with Fflur.

"What madness next?" he laughed. "All Lunden yelps on a stray dog's scent! The roe runs yonder."

He nodded over-shoulder, roughly westward, up the river.

"Ride!" Caswallon roared, and they were off, all eight-and-twenty chariots in action at the gesture of his arm, before the word could clip the air. He never finished it. It was a vowel cut in half. There was neither shout nor whip-crack, but two hundred hoofs struck earth together and the five lines wheeled into a single stream that poured through the gate behind its leaders, no collisions, no hubs striking, no sound except the bumping of bronze wheels, the squeak of straining basketwork, and the staccato thunder of the hoofs.

Caswallon drove like wind, Fflur keeping pace with him and Orwic not a dozen yards behind. Before a mile had ribboned under wheel, the leaders were beyond hail and the five-and-twenty let the intervening distance grow, conserving their own horses' strength. Not long, and there was no procession visible, only when Tros listened, he could hear the thump and splash when they who followed plunged into a ford, and now and then he caught a glimpse of them hard-galloping across a crest of rising ground.

So, for an hour, they drove at full pelt within a furlong of the swamps beside the river, crossing long arms of the forest, skirting the fenced meadows until they reached a hill from whose summit they could see the Thames curved like a silver snake below them. There Caswallon drew rein and let the foaming stallions breathe awhile, his eyes and Fflur's intent on the sunlit view.

Smoke came from fifty homesteads. There were cattle browsing in a hundred fields. Peace lay along the valley like the smile of the Earth Goddess.

"When I tax them for their own protection, they rebel!" Caswallon remarked drily, his eyes still searching out the details of the landscape.

He was a huntsman born, but Fflur's eyes just as soon as his detected an alertness in the movement of a herd of fallow-deer that grazed, five miles away, on the short, sweet grass between a copse-edge and the high fence of a homestead. Orwic was the first to speak:

"Men moving—not toward them, but up-wind and rather quietly. There's a road over there beyond the river. It runs between high banks topped with brambles. That's where your runaways are, Tros! They'll be dog-tired and all in a herd—hot-foot—keeping together, lest stragglers get in trouble with the farmers. Where did they cross the river, though?"

Caswallon pointed. Down a vista between tree-tops they could see an abandoned ferry-scow that lay against the far bank of the river, half in water.

"The tide's flowing," Tros remarked.

"And in an hour," said Fflur, "there will be a hundred feet of soft mud there. No good for chariot wheels!"

Caswallon laughed, the quick, short bark he always gave when he could see solutions.

"The fools expect pursuit. There was a second ferry-scow. They've sunk it. I wager they've scuttled the one we can see. If we should cross the river here—it might be done, we could swim the horses—they would scatter. It would take a month of hunting to get half of them. The thing they don't expect, is to be headed off. There's a ford at Rhyd-y-Cadgerbydan." *

"If you get ahead of them and hunt them back toward Lunden, they'll be killed to a man," Fflur objected. "Our Lundeners will be in no good humor after having wasted half a morning on a wrong scent."

"Mother of my sons, I laugh!" Caswallon answered. "They have been afoot since two hours before dawn. How much farther do you think the fools can run? True, Tros has overfed them, but a man's strength has a limit. When they find us in the way, they will lose all heart and lie down. We will drive them home between the chariots, slowly, like pigs to market!"

Chariot after chariot came galloping and drew rein on the hilltop, breathing the horses, until all five-and-twenty were in line again and all the bow-and-arrow men had gathered beside Caswallon's wheels to receive his orders, leather cases over their shoulders with the arrow ends protruding where they could pluck them with the right hand easily and fast.

Tros felt as resentful as a fisherman whose seine-net has been torn through his own carelessness. No talking could improve the situation. Advice from him would be impertinence. It was he, not they, who had lost two hundred slaves. They, not he, who must

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* Teddington: The word means battle chariots.

retrieve them for him. It was more than probable that, being in a band and desperate, the runaways had done more mischief than the sinking of one scow. More likely than not, they had murdered lonely farmers and anybody else who might happen to have seen them, their one hope of escape depending chiefly on a long start. They would have done everything possible to prevent the true direction of their flight from being known.

And law was law. The law of Britain as concerned slaves varied very little from that of other countries. For whatever a slave, fugitive or not, might do his owner was responsible. Which was fair enough, considering that an owner was allowed to punish his own slaves as he saw fit, and though he might not kill them he might turn them over to the public executioner, his own unchallengeable accusation being tantamount to sentence by a court of law.

So there would be a bill to pay, none knew how big. For every murder done there would be a dozen or more of the runaways tortured, to discover the real culprits, who would be put to death. And tortured men make poor beginners at the deep-sea oar-work that Tros had in view.

Not least toward the making of the loss disastrous was the point of view of bow-and-arrow men, turned out at a moment's notice and brought full pelt in pursuit. Such men were hardly likely not to want to flesh an arrow once or twice before accepting slaves' surrender. It appeared to Tros he would be lucky if he only lost a hundred of the fugitives killed, maimed and missing. And he would probably have to reward Caswallon's men at something less than one-third of the market price of each survivor, since not even the king's friendship could offset the law of Britain.

However, Fflur surprised him. Her gray eyes observed the glowering disgust in his.

"Lord Tros," she laughed, "you came hot-foot to Gaul to rescue me from Cæsar. Watch now how I repay."

She paused a moment, signing to her husband and to Orwic to be still, then studying the faces of the bowmen. Hot they were, and hard-eyed, leashed hounds, eager to be loosed against the quarry.

"Does any of you love me?" she inquired, and for a moment after that they stared at her, grinning. Then there was a murmur of her name, a rising buzz of protest.

She knew, without their saying it, they loved her. All did. Why the question? Two or three men strung their bows—expression of their willingness to fight for her, and die if need be.

"Try us!" said a big man standing close beside her chariot wheel. "How many shall we slay?"

"You, you at least might have known better!" she answered. "When the town judge sentenced you to lose a hand for stealing, was it I who had charged you? Or do I remember rightly that I paid the fine, and over and above that, too, the restitution money? Was it I or some one else who begged a place for you in the Lord Caswallon's following? Do you think the maiming of a poor wretch pleases me?"

The man grinned at her sheepishly, leaning his weight on his bow, unstringing it.

"Is there one man here for whom I have not done favors?" Fflur asked, raising her voice. "Wounds, brawling and dismissals, wives in child-birth nursed, debts, and the prospect of slavery for debt."

Murmuring again—another protest of a deep, remembered gratitude from men who were none the less puzzled by her choosing that time and that place for an appeal to their affection.

But Caswallon got down from the chariot to feel his horses' forelegs, satisfied that Fflur could do with men-at-arms what he, their battle-leader, could not.

Orwic looked stolidly bored. The climate, and it may be, breeding, had produced in him a distaste for scenes in public that even remotely touched the sentimental. He was for action, first, last, all the time, nor too much talk about it afterward unless by way of humorous, half cynical review.

"Lud's blood!" he grumbled. "What now?"

"The Lord Tros helped to rescue me from Gaul," Fflur went on, using the middle notes of the voice that resembled her father, Mygnach's. They did say Mygnach had such magic in him that the birds sat still in the trees to listen when he chanted his orison to the sun. "The Lord Tros goes to Rome to risk his life and all he has that we in Britain may be saved from Cæsar. I would like to treat the Lord Tros gratefully. I think a gift from you, for my sake, if you will, of all those slaves of his, recaptured and unharmed, without the customary price on them, would be an offering the gods would call a manly gift. What say you?"

There was not much that they could say. Some grinned, half-shamefacedly, like boys in good time lectured against poaching, that they had intended, and regretfully refrained from. Many of them nodded, trying to look statesmanly sagacious. All of them watched Tros, expecting he would speak. But Tros sat silent in the chariot, not pleased that he must be recipient of favors. Only he knew how immensely he preferred that others should receive his largesse, rather than he theirs. But also, only he knew that the money he had won from Cæsar half-a-year ago had dwindled almost to the last coin, lavished on the ship, and now he had nothing but the druids' pearls out of which to pay fines and ransoms. He was nearer to disaster than Fflur guessed, and carkingly self-critical.

Tros had the trick of silence, though, as Orwic had asserted, he could blow like a northeaster when he chose with gusts of words that carried all before him. Orwic, like the others, looked at him to speak now and, since Tros continued staring straight in front of him, tried urging.

"Tros, what say you?"

"Fflur is right," he answered, and sat still. He had an intuition that, though Fflur was right, some other force or set of forces, whether human or superhuman made small difference just then, was gone awry. He ached for action, yet did not dare to show impatience lest the men-at-arms should take that cue to extort a ransom after all. He was trying, with all his self-control, to open his mind and let the gods pour information in, ignoring semblances and listening for the inner voice that seldom failed him. But the only thought that seemed to bubble and repeat itself behind his brain was Skell! Skell!

Caswallon took the reins.

"Are we agreed? Then ride!" he shouted, and they were off once more, down a long lane between sheep pastures where the deer browsed at the forest's edge and awkward fawns loped out of sight behind their dams, to turn and stare when they were gone.

There was no more hesitancy and no speech. Caswallon was in action now, each move fore-calculated, every fraction of the horses' strength considered and expended with the goal in mind.

They thundered downhill, leaping fallen tree-trunks, so that the chariots were like the slings of catapults and Tros had to cling to the wickerwork side with both hands, taking short cuts that would have scared a squirrel, one wheel over a pit's edge, and nothing but the speed and the weight of a horse's shoulder on the pole to keep the lot from overturning; leaping a ditch without so much as checking, crashing through the farmer's fence beyond it, around three ricks and through the oaken paling on the far side, knocking it down with the bronze-headed chariot pole. They left a swath behind them like the path of a winter's hurricane.

And so to the river by Rhyd-y-Cadgerbydan.

"Where, if Cæsar ever gets this far, I will give him and his legions battle,"* said Caswallon, pausing to let the horses breathe again before they plunged breast-deep into the river.

CHAPTER LV

"THE FOOL! LORD ZEUS, WHAT SHALL I DO WITH HIM?"

Justice? Let a captain see he have it. Let him remember that a fellow feeling is the juice of justice. Let him wring out the juice. Let him smite with what is left when the juice is wrung forth and bestowed.

Justice that hath no humor and no mercy is the cloak of fear that hypocrites employ to hide the greed and meanness of their lying hearts.

Aye, let a captain well weigh justice.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

From the ford to the road the runaways were taking was only a few miles, and the going easy. Caswallon drove full speed.

"To wind the horses well, lest they should neigh and betray us when we set an ambush," he explained.

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* Teddington: When Cæsar invaded Britain for the second time, this was where Caswallon actually did prepare his final stand, driving stakes into the ford and holding it with dogged courage until deserted by his men. By preparing this site for a pitched battle he succeeded in decoying Cæsar and his legions away from "Lundēn Town," which Cæsar never saw or he would surely have mentioned the place in his *De Bello Gallico.*

He had the lay of all the country in his mind and chose a place where two lanes met in a hollow, half-filled with elms and brambles. Water and the traffic of the years had cut the lanes so deep that banks on either side of them rose twenty feet high. In the center of the hollow, near the intersection of the lanes, was a pool of limpid water, brook-fed, with fleecy clouds and branches of the overhanging elms reflected in it, a sure temptation to leg-weary runaways to rest themselves and wait for stragglers.

"For whom they will certainly wait," Caswallon argued. "They will not dare to leave lame men along the road, any more than a hunted fox leaves more scent than he can help, but crosses brooks and the bare rock where his scent won't lie. There will be a rear-guard, urging on the laggards with sharpened sticks."

The setting of the ambush was a simple matter. On the theory that perhaps the fugitives had stolen a few horses on their way that might neigh and so give the alarm, Caswallon ordered the chariot teams unyoked and led away to a considerable distance. Then he posted all his men, well hidden, around the rim of the hollow, with orders not to loose one arrow in any event unless he should give them leave by signal.

One bugle blast would mean that they should show themselves; two, that they should be on guard against a rush by the fugitives; three, that they might shoot one flight of arrows to prevent any desperate detachment from breaking through the cordon.

"But you may not shoot to kill," Caswallon ordered. "Hit them in the arms and legs."

Three blasts repeated was to mean that a fight was on in earnest, but that signal would not be given unless it should prove that the runaways had somehow managed to steal weapons and could not be captured without bloodshed.

It looked like a plan that could hardly fail, but Tros was nervous. For a while he lay still beside Orwic with Glendwyr beside him, admiring the silence that the ambushed Britons kept. So still they were that rabbits came and nibbled the sweet spring grass almost within arm's reach. But a red fox, scouting for a meal, sniffed once, turned swiftly in his tracks and vanished. Birds, busy with their nesting in tree and thicket, sang as if nothing in the world were wrong, but five fallow does with fawns at foot, on their way to the pool in the hollow to drink, sniffed two or three times at the tainted air, listened and then fled as if a pack of hounds were after them.

It was intuition that made Tros restless. The day was one to make the blood race in the veins—all fair spring weather with the leaves a-budding, blue sky overhead, and underfoot the violets and yellow primroses; scent of wet, brown earth, and bird-song in the air. But Tros' skin tingled while his blood ran sluggish, and the constant picture in his mind—he could not blot it out—was of his ship without a crew.

"I go to look," he whispered, and left Orwic lying prone between two elm trees at one end of the horseshoe ambush. Glendwyr followed him.

He walked a hundred yards and chose a high tree, climbed it with seaman's skill and from the fork of the highest branches watched the countryside for half-an-hour. At the end of that time, in the middle distance, he could see his stream of fugitives with half-a-dozen stolen horses, densely packed together between the hedgerows of the winding lane that threaded its long way toward the hollow where the ambush waited.

So far, good. He could hardly count them, but it looked as if the whole lot were in one herd, heading straight for the net. They were coming with the desperate, determined, silent haste of tired men who have but one hope and no line of retreat. But why so close together? Why no stragglers for the rearguard to prick forward? No scouts in advance or on the flanks? They might have used the horses for the obviously necessary scout work, but instead, they had put four men on each horse and to the eye, at that distance, there was hardly a square yard visible between their serried ranks from end to end of the procession.

It was Glendwyr, a branch below Tros, who saw the reason for the dense formation and the grim haste.

"Horsemen!" he said suddenly, and pointed.

Headlong down the hill, beyond the ford, there came a stream of mounted men in hot pursuit, riding like centaurs, scattered, racing to be first to overtake the fugitives—a prize worth spurring for—a third of each slave's value for the captor, and a dozen an easy bag for one armed, mounted man!

"Pluto!"

Tros came down the tree like a bear shot from below, two branches snapping under him as he took all chances. Glendwyr dropped to earth beside him. Tros took him by the throat.

"You were their leader! Go to them! Say you have fled from me and are again their leader! Show them a hiding place! Lead them to where the ambush waits, and keep them there at all costs!"

"They will kill me," said Glendwyr. "They won't believe—"

Tros choked and shook him.

"Do you know what to obey means? Any man can die! That's nothing!"

He let go and Glendwyr ran. Tros, hardly daring to hope that Glendwyr could succeed, or that he would even try to succeed, turned and ran at top speed in the opposite direction, flinging himself breathless on the grass beside Orwic.

"Horses!" he panted. "To horse!"

Orwic wanted explanations. Tros, recovering his breath, stood, leaning against a tree and shouted across the hollow to where Caswallon lay beside Fflur.

"Your Lundeners are coming! Get between them and the runaways, or—"

Caswallon's answering shout clipped off the news midword. There was a stir among the brambles, word passed mouth-to-mouth, and then a long cry, ululating from the ambushed bowmen who lay nearest to where the horses had been hidden. Ten breaths more and the horses were on the way, ridden and led full-gallop by the charioteers. Sooner than Tros could breathe again evenly, the teams were yoked, and eight-and-twenty chariots wheeled clear of the lane toward rising ground, behind which they could make a circuit and arrive unseen behind the rear of the oncoming fugitives.

"They will scatter! I fear they will scatter! How close is the pursuit?" Caswallon asked, leaning forward, fanning the stallions' necks with loose reins.

"On the far side of the Rhyd-y-Cadgerbydan."

"How close to it? Can we reach the ford first?"

"You can try!" Tros answered grimly, and Caswallon laughed.

"A hundred men can hold that ford against a thousand! If we get there first, I'll spare you half my men to hunt your runaways!"

They ran all risks of being seen and heard, their heads appearing constantly above the shoulder of the rise as Caswallon led the way, forcing his tired stallions to the last strained limit of their strength; Fflur's chariot, lighter than his, but with only two mares, close behind him—and keeping pace. It was likely that she could do more than Caswallon could to check the men of Lunden at the ford without having to draw bow against them.

Dense alders, and a heron-haunted swamp between them and the lane, served as a luck-given screen exactly at the moment when they passed the fugitives. Tros, standing in the chariot, heard high-pitched voices that sent the herons winging toward their nests in the near-by elms. It was likely enough that Glendwyr had already reached the fugitives and was in speech with them.

"No need! Never mind the ford!" Tros clutched Caswallon by the shoulder. "Turn around the swamp and come up from behind them. Herd them all into that hollow and surround them until pursuit comes up!"

"Not I!" Caswallon laughed. "I'll try the ford. I want to see how many men can hold it against Cæsar, if he ever comes!"

He shook the reins again and cried out to the stallions, but Tros still clutched his shoulder, shouting in his ear.

"Then give me one chariot. I'll turn back."

Caswallon spared him one swift glance and drew rein, recognizing resolution.

"Jump!" he commanded. Then, glancing over-shoulder as the other chariots wheeled right and left to avoid collision, "Orwic, give Tros the last chariot!"

He was away again almost before Tros's feet were on the ground, Fflur hard at his heels and all the other teams but Orwic's in mid-stride on the instant.

"So!" laughed Orwic, beckoning to Tros to mount beside him. "Mine is the last chariot! Am I then not obedient? You who are to be my captain aboard ship! At the ford down yonder, if Caswallon gets there first, there will only be a fish-wife argument. I would rather be in at the kill. Let me see you manhandle that runaway mob. I believe you can do it alone. And by the way, Tros"—Orwic's almost unvaryingly bantering voice changed to a more serious note—"Caswallon rides hard, but he's only a king, and unless—mind you, unless he can reach that ford in time you'll have your work cut out. The pursuers will scatter around him and come howling for the loot like wolves after a flock of sheep!"

There was a din of voices from the lane where it seemed that Glendwyr or, at any rate, some one or something had halted the fugitives. The din grew to an angry roar and died, then rose again into a tumult as the march resumed; and a minute or two later the herons flew back to the swamp to hunt frogs.

"Follow them?" asked Orwic.

"No. Make the circuit again and be there by the pool when they come."

The handsome face of Orwic beamed. He foresaw drama, lives of men at stake, his own included; no resource but quick wit and effrontery. He wheeled the team on its haunches, laughed at Tros and then at the charioteer beside him.

Away then, full gallop, toward the tree-surrounded hollow, Tros's eyes studying the approach to it, observing that though men in pursuit of the fugitives might make a wide circuit to outflank Caswallon and win past him, they would nevertheless be obliged to turn into the lane before reaching the hollow in order not to lose time negotiating swamps and thickly wooded, rough ground. There was a neck, where the lane led into the hollow between high banks, through which, inevitably, the pursuit must come.

And, better still, the place looked like a perfect trap from that direction. Bottle-necked, comparatively inaccessible from either flank, it was exactly the sort of spot where hunted fugitives would be likely to offer a forlorn resistance. Men in pursuit, possessed of any martial or hunting skill, would hardly dream of entering that gap between the banks without a pause to reconnoiter. Time would be all in Tros's favor.

He checked Orwic when they reached the narrow entrance; stepped down from the chariot.

"Ride you forward," he commanded with a gesture of such confident authority that Orwic grinned. "Ride straight on through the hollow, up the lane on the far side and conceal yourself. There wait. Give me that bugle of yours. So. If I should blow a blast on it, then make as much noise in the bushes as if there were five-and-twenty of you. Shout commands, as if to other chariots, keep out of sight most of the time, but keep moving, showing yourself for a moment at a time, first here, then there.

"It might be well to shoot one arrow, or possibly two or three, provided you hit nobody. Remember, they are weary men, easier to herd than cattle provided they are not terrified beyond reason. When you have thrashed about sufficiently among the bushes, if they should look like making a concerted rush, then show yourself and shout to them they are surrounded but in safety of their lives if they stay still. Make haste now. Hear them. They come running!"

Orwic vanished at full gallop, leaving deep wheel-ruts on soft earth that already had been criss-crossed by the wheels of five-and-twenty chariots. Tros climbed the bank and hid himself among the trees. The leading fugitives had seen the narrow opening that led to a position they might possibly defend a while, and now the whole two hundred of them poured along the lane at something better than a jogtrot, breathless.

"I am ashamed!" Tros muttered.

He had seldom seen more miserable looking men, not even in the labor gangs of Egypt. White skins heightened incongruity. Fed healthiness increased the horror of despair. They were armed with sharpened sticks, scythes stolen from the farms they passed, a few tools such as hammers stolen from the shipyard, and here and there a knife thong-fastened to a pole. They were footsore; nine out of ten of them limped; and because Tros had clothed them all alike in smocks and leather jackets, and none had had hair or beard trimmed since the building of the ship began, they appeared to belong to one drab brotherhood of wild-eyed fear.

"How shall a man make men of them?" Tros wondered. Yet, because they had been well fed and had worked hard, they were stronger than the ordinary run of men. There was no lack there of stature or of muscle.

Glendwyr was in their midst, not bound or hurt, but evidently captive. Four or five inches taller than the men who crowded in on him, alone of them all clothed in a free man's breeches and fur-trimmed coat, he had what they lacked—freedom from within. Obviously he had not succeeded in convincing them that he had left earned freedom to throw in his lot once more with hunted rebels;

there were sharp sticks pointed at his back; a scythe swayed too suggestively within an arm's length of his face.

As plain to see as if words told it, they had threatened him with death if his tale should turn out to be false. But he looked like a man in danger, not a hunted slave. His eyes glanced right and left for a sight of Tros, but Tros did not leave his hiding place among the trees until the last man limped into the hollow and he could hear the splashing as they bathed their lame feet in the pool.

"Zeus! But they are beaten men!" he muttered.

They had posted no scouts to give warning of pursuit. Instead of setting men in ambush at the narrow entrance, they were arguing, holding a crows' congress by the pool, perhaps condemning Glendwyr. There was angry shouting, but Tros could not catch the words. He began to wonder how to rescue Glendwyr, being minded not to lose a promising lieutenant, but he could think of no way at the moment without adding to Glendwyr's danger and risking a rush by the slaves for the open.

At last he heard Glendwyr's voice in masterful appeal, bold, loud and with a note of mockery:

"What do I care whether I am killed or not! You idiots! Set a guard there at the entrance! If I were the Lord Tros, and caught you maa-ing like sheep that smell wolves, I would hang you for crow meat! You have one hope! Hold this place until the Lord Tros rescues you! Punish you for running? Yes, of course he will, and soundly, or I don't know him! But if I were he, I would whip the slave to death who let himself be caught and ransomed rather than make the best of failure and restore himself to his master without expense! Kill me if you like, you fools! I will die free, which is more than any of you will do! I warn you, the Lord Tros loves a man who loses handsomely. Set a guard there by the entrance and defend yourselves until the Lord Tros comes!"

The answer to that was a babel of long argument, of which Tros could not distinguish anything. The upshot of it was, that presently a company of thirty men with knives and sharpened sticks came trudging out of the hollow and sat down in two rows straight across the narrowest neck of the lane, their lines extending up the bank of either side of it. The man in the center of the front rank had a bow and half-a-dozen arrows; being better armed, he seemed to have assumed the leadership.

Tros, bugle in his left hand, leaving his right arm free to use his long sword, but not drawing it, retreated from the shelter of the trees and made a circuit, reaching the lane where a bulge in the bank projected just sufficiently to hide him. Very cautiously he peered around the edge of that and watched until the thirty men became engaged in argument, their eyes on one another. Then, in three strides, he was in the middle of the lane, fists on his hips, feet spread apart, his lion's eyes a-laugh and strong teeth showing in a grin that knew fear too well to yield to it at any time. They saw him suddenly, and nine-and-twenty of them froze with fear.

"Put that down!" he ordered.

The man in the midst had drawn bow, arrow to his ear.

"Lay down your weapons! You fools! You know the penalty for slaves in arms!"

He began to stride toward them, conscious of the sword against his left hip, but not moving his right hand toward it; in no hurry, and yet not slowly, aware that the light in the notch of the lane at his back made him a perfect target.

The bowman hesitated. It was the man to his right beside him who struck the bow upward at the moment when he loosed the arrow. It whined in a parabola ten feet in air above Tros's head.

Tros kicked the bow out of his hand, then kicked him hard under the chin and sent him sprawling; seized a sharpened stick and thrashed him with it until the crimson bruises swelled from head to heel.

Then when the writhing wretch had no more breath to sob with as he bit the muddied turf, Tros strode ten paces farther up the lane and turned to face the others.

"I said, lay your weapons down! Lay them down! You are surrounded. You—" he pointed at the nearest man—"go and tell Glendwyr to come here!"

The man threw down his knife and ran to carry out the order. Tros paused to give him time, then, when he heard him blurting out the news, blew a long blast on the bugle. It was answered instantly by shouts from Orwic and the crashing and plunging of a chariot in the undergrowth on the far side of the hollow. Orwic had divided forces, for his shouts were answered from a distance by the charioteer. There came a noise from beside the pool as if a hundred bee-hives had been overturned, then a cry from one throat—

"Mercy!"

Orwic answered it. Tros had a mental picture of him, standing in his peaked steel cap between two elm trees, laughing as he leaned to peer down at the frightened mob.

"Throw down your weapons! Ho there, archers! Shoot if they refuse! Wait! Wait! They obey! Throw up your hands! All of you! Archers! Shoot any man who holds a weapon!"

An arrow whined across the hollow and went plunk into a tree.

"Mercy!"

It was a hundred voices this time, followed by Orwic's boyish laugh.

Tros turned to face another problem. There were horsemen coming full pelt up the lane from the direction of the ford by Rhyd-y-Cadgerbydan. As Glendwyr reached his side he turned and strode along the lane to meet them, standing hands on hips exactly where the fellow with the bow had taken aim at him.

"It was the bugle-note that saved me!" Glendwyr laughed. "They had a noose all tied to hang me by! Some bright one had suggested that if they should hang me they could blame me afterward for having tempted them to run away! They are beaten men, Lord Tros. There is neither fight nor run left in them."

"Aye, but there is fight in these!" Tros screwed up his eyes to scan the faces of a dozen horsemen who had drawn rein where the lane began to narrow, nearly a hundred yards away, and were discussing the situation. Several of them had dismounted and were examining their horses' legs, scraping the muddy sweat off them with cupped hands. It was a minute or two before they realized who Tros was, because the shadow of the high bank fell across the lane. Then one man shouted to him:

"Hah! Then we are in time, Lord Tros! We hunt your slaves. We rode far on a false scent, but your man Skell rode after us and clapped us on the right one. Skell ought to be rewarded. Caswallon, it seems, wants the slaves to escape! He is blocking the ford against all comers, but we swam the stream. The slaves can't be far ahead. Have you a horse?"

"I have the slaves and five-and-twenty chariots!" Tros answered. "I thank you for your courtesy, but I need no help."

The men began to ride up-lane toward him, each clutching his weapon in constrained, ill-omened silence. They had come well equipped for a man hunt—swords, spears, bows and arrows, rope. They halted again ten yards away, and Glendwyr picked up one of the long knives a slave had dropped. Tros recognized one of the horsemen, Rhys, a member of Caswallon's council.

"I stand by," Glendwyr remarked in a low voice.

"Lord Tros," said Rhys, and hesitated, not glancing to the right or left but, as it were, feeling for his men's support. He was red-eyed from exertion—a big lean fellow with a mass of reddish hair, a long nose and high cheek-bones, on a horse whose legs trembled from weariness. "You shall pay me for this day's effort! We were a-horse before dawn. We have ridden the noon out, all for your sake."

"Not on my invitation," Tros retorted, keeping his right hand well away from the projecting sword-hilt. "Glendwyr, get behind me!" he whispered. "Keep your weapon out of sight!"

"Lord Tros, that is a lie! Your man Skell came and clapped us on the scent."

"Not with my authority," said Tros.

"He is your slave, isn't he? For what he does, you answer. It is not our fault if he is ill-trained. You say, you have caught your slaves. Where are they?"

"Safe," said Tros.

"Well, I am a reasonable man."

The red-haired, thin-nosed nobleman glanced right and left at last, took stock of his companions, and went on—

"Pay me half the proper ransom-money and I will cry quits!"

Tros laughed. He always did laugh when the odds were all against him and demands were made to which he was determined not to yield. Sometimes that volcanic, dry bark bursting from his chest disarmed an adversary's will. Not always.

"Easy to laugh!" said the other, growing truculent. "I doubt that story of the five-and-twenty chariots! See—" he drew the other man's attention—"here are the wheelmarks of a score or so proceeding this way, and but one returning. If anybody asked me, I would say those are Caswallon's chariots, and we know where he is." He turned to the others. "This looks like a scurvy trick to me. He and his friend Caswallon and Mygnach's daughter Fflur proposed to cheat us of our dues! However, he tries to cheat the wrong man. We will flush that covert and enjoy some profitable hunting after our long ride!"

Rhys jerked the spear free from its sling behind his shoulder and made two or three practice passes with it, with its point in Tros's direction. But Tros still kept his hand away from the projecting sword-hilt. He did not dare to blow the bugle yet, because Orwic might interpret that into a signal to use violence on the slaves. Nor did he propose, if it could be helped, to fight a member of the council. He had a perfect right to protect himself and his human property if he could do it, but the slaves had been proscribed by general alarm as runaways, and the obviously profitable thing for Rhys to do was to chase the slaves into the open, where he could round them up and claim redemption money. Rhys turned to his companions.

"Better make haste," he remarked. "There will be others presently. Why share the profit? You four keep his lordship occupied! The rest of us will ride in!"

Tros drew his sword at last, a thing he never did unless he meant to use it. And he said nothing, which was another of his characteristics in extremity. His silence, more than any speech he might have made, gave the opponents pause. Rhys laughed unpleasantly.

"Hold him here, four of you. The rest of you follow me!"

He began to wheel his trembling horse, and Tros made up his mind to retreat to the pool, where the slaves would be all around him, so that afterward he would be able to assert they were under control and, if he should slay any one, he would be able to claim he did so in defense of them. But as he took one short step backward he heard a yell behind him. Thunder of hoofs and wheels came, not along the lane but down the bank-side like an avalanche. He and Glendwyr sprang to the opposite bank in the nick of time. Orwic, one foot on the chariot-front, the reins in both hands, made his frantic team leap as they were six feet from the bottom, preserving them from a fall beneath the chariot by a trick of horsemanship so near to magic as to make Tros gasp, wheeled them down the middle of the lane before they could lose impetus, and charged headlong at the twelve who blocked the way.

Down they went, horse and rider, in a shouting, blasphemous confusion. Orwic, avalanching through the midst and struggling for fifty yards or more to rein in the frantic team. Before he could turn, some of the riders were on their feet, clustering together, looking the wrong way, expecting another chariot. Three horses were too badly injured to get up, others had bolted. Before the riders had time to collect their wits and scatter Orwic was coming again headlong. A horse's shoulder knocked the Lord Rhys stunned against the bank; the others, leaping right and left, avoided wheels by inches.

"Run!" laughed Orwic. "Run before I signal!"

He leaned out of the chariot, beckoning to Tros to pass the bugle to him, held it to his lips and filled his lungs. But they did not wait to find out whether a bugle signal would bring reinforcements; they took the threat for granted, cried, "Hold! Enough!" and ran to catch their horses.

"Home! Home with you!" Orwic shouted. "Get you home before I name you and lay charges!"

Then he stepped out of the chariot and took the stunned man by the hair, discovered he was conscious, shook him, dragged him to his feet, shook him again and kicked him down the lane toward his friends.

"Better let me forget who you are!" he called after him and turning to examine the injured horses, drew his sword across their throats.

"You may have to pay for three horses, brother Tros," he remarked, wiping his sword as he strolled back. "That would be an act of generosity that should draw Rhys's teeth. And I wager he won't talk! But if you had killed Rhys or his men, Lud love you! Not even Fflur could have saved you from indemnities that would have cost you half the tin from off your ship."

Tros stepped into the chariot and they drove slowly to the pool to count the slaves. There were only four men missing, of whom one, they said, was drowned when they crossed the river, and three, losing heart, had returned to the shipyard.

"I will sell those three!" said Tros. "They are not slaves, they are animals. Nay, I will not even sell them, I will give them in exchange for those three horses that were overthrown just now and injured! Glendwyr, take some men and skin me those three horses. Cut the meat up, have it cooked, and feed these rascals or I'll never get them home!"

He asked no further questions, made no inquiries as to who the ringleaders might be, threatened no punishments, intended none. He and Orwic strolled together, arm-in-arm, beside the pool, Tros praising Orwic's horsemanship and Orwic trying to talk of anything else under the sun because the subject of his own achievements bored him.

"I suppose," said Orwic, "you will have to have these poor fools flogged?"

"Not I!" Tros answered with his great full-chested laugh. "I no more flog a man who has his belly full of grief than you flog a foundered horse. I am rather pleased with them. See how they stuck together! And only three faint-hearted ones among the lot! Those three discovered and all ready to be weeded out before I set sail! Hah! I begin to believe I shall have a fair crew after all."

"But have you enough yet?"

"No, not by a hundred men. And I have one who will make more trouble for me than the hundred that I lack! Yet I can not get rid of Skell, for I have promised him a chance to prove himself. Hey! What a fool a man is with his promises! Look you. Skell is nine days out of prison, where I put him for treason as black as the inside of a tar pot. He inclines now toward honesty, being one of those teetering bastards built like an Antioch scale, with manliness at one end of the balance-arm and false weights at the other. Intending me a good turn, he claps the men of Lunden on the trail of these runaways and all but costs me a fortune. And that's nothing to what he's likely to do when fortune finds him opportunity in some foreign port! What shall I do with the fool? Lord Zeus, what shall I do with him!"

"Send him to Cæsar!" said Orwic. "He might serve as well as a woman to break Cæsar's wheels."

To his surprise, Tros took the suggestion seriously, pacing up and down, both hands behind him now, turning over in his mind the pros and cons of it. He was still meditating, frowning when Caswallon came with a fresh team he had appropriated somewhere, laughing, confident, Tros's problems out of mind because of a brand new solution for his own.

"Tros, brother Tros!" he shouted. "I have Cæsar by the horns!" Drawing rein, he leaned out of the chariot and took Tros by the shoulder. "Let him come!" he said, with one of his confident nods. "That ford by Rhyd-y-Cadgerbydan shall be the battle-ground, for I have seen now how to hold it. I will drive stakes in the river bed. Then we will tempt Cæsar inland, away from the coast and reinforcements, harrying his legions all the way with horse and chariot, opposing him enough in front to keep him occupied and out of reach of Lunden until we check him at the ford by Rhyd-y-Cadgerbydan with half his legionaries drowning and our own men charging downhill from his rear to cut off his retreat. Let him come! We have Cæsar beaten!" *

CHAPTER LVI

A BARGAIN WITH THE DRUIDS

Such wisdom as I have, I think enables me to recognize a higher wisdom when I meet it. Him who hath it, I obey, of my own will, in the knowledge that a higher wisdom will demand no more than a lesser can properly do. But when I find clowns in the garb of wisemen, masking avarice within the folds of solemn ignorance, by Zeus such hypocrites must buy whatever good for themselves they hope to get from me. For a high price paid in advance I sell to such impostors; and I sell them nothing I would not have given freely had they asked with the decent dignity of honorable men in need. Such men should be made to buy the sunshine.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

TROUBLES increased as the day drew near that Tros had set long in advance for the launching. He had hoped, by making that a popular spectacle, to win the public to his side and, perhaps, to

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* There were stakes in the ford beside Teddington Bridge as recently as thirty years ago. Caswallon's plan succeeded until his own men ran and his allies deserted him. Even so, Cæsar only won a "Pyrrhic" victory and had to retreat to the sea.

recruit a score or two of freemen for his crew by exciting admiration, curiosity and those other emotions that stir men to act on the spur of a moment.

Nothing had he left undone to make the event spectacular, even as he had overlooked no element of danger that could be foreseen. The ways, down which the ship must slide, had been reinforced and, in places, even shored with masonry. He had anchors buried deep on shore and prodigiously heavy flaxen cables to prevent the ship, when launched, from gliding too far across the river.

To make sure the ship would start when he gave the signal, he had set a turn-screw in position, by which he could raise the huge balks of timber on which the bow end rested, thus increasing the slant to overcome inertia. And he had greased the ways so thickly with good hog fat that even his friend Caswallon complained of the extravagance.

The ship rested in a cradle made of elm, so there was no risk that friction would strip off the tin from her undersides. Sigurdsen had spent a whole day taking soundings in the river bed to make sure there were no submerged wrecks or obstructions in the stream. At all strategic points within the yard Tros had secretly placed quantities of his appalling chemical, with instructions to Conops to fire it if the crowd of spectators should unexpectedly turn riotous.

But more than any physical precaution that he took, acceptance by the druids of his invitation to be present and to bless the ship was Tros's chief guarantee of a successful launching. He would have preferred to leave the druids out of it. Having extorted pearls from them, he was conscious of their resentment, and he preferred the ill-will of men less practised than the druids in the art of making thought produce results. He had too much experience of priests in Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem and elsewhere not to know that the preliminary steps of decadence destroy all vision and the power to do good, but do not for a while destroy the energy itself or its accumulated impetus. He would have been almost as pleased with the druids' curse, just then, as with their blessing.

But an undiscoverable enemy set rumor stirring. It was whispered, then repeated in the market-place, that Tros intended to perform a human sacrifice before the launching, in order that the ship might have a soul and be superior to other ships. From mouth to mouth the tale waxed circumstantial. He would bind a living slave across the ways and let the ship slide over him, drowning the victim's screams with a fanfare of trumpets and salvo of war-drums. Representations were made to the king and council that the superstitious cruelty should be prevented.

The council in full session sent for Tros, who, arms akimbo, laughing angrily, repudiated any suggestion of sacrifice of any sort whatever.

"Lord Caswallon—noblemen!" he snorted in disgust. "I hold myself inferior in all things to the meanest of the gods, and I would shudder at the thought of cruelty to win my favor! What then is it likely that the gods would think? I would forever count myself an exile from the company of all that host of spiritual beings who surround us and employ our manhood, whose very breath is inspiration to the brave. If I should tolerate a human sacrifice, if I should perpetrate it, I would say, 'My soul has left me. Henceforth I am no man, a thing!'"

But one member of the council was the Lord Rhys, who smarted from a previous attempt to pull Tros's purse-strings. Rich from impeaching law-breakers and buying up their property when they must sell to pay the heavy fines imposed, he was not to be decoyed by spiritual herrings drawn across a chance to profit by another man's predicament. He already had one issue against Tros. The hope he might be bribed lurked in his cold eyes as he leaned forward and, without rising, pointed an accusing forefinger, used it to knock off a drop from the end of his nose, and then pointed again.

"The Lord Tros speaks with much assurance about gods, of whom he affects to know a great deal. But we all know that human sacrifice has been made before now at the launching of ships, by men who think more of their own superstitions than of the law and the opinions of decent people. Such men invariably hide their evil practices and deny them after the event. It happens I have seen the ship, which is a monster and not like any ship previously built. Not only is it plated underneath with precious metal of a value greater than a whole year's taxes from my district, but there is a golden serpent having two tails, one of which coils the full length of the ship on either side until they reach the stern, where they are joined together and project into the air. We all know that the use of snakes by anybody but the druids is a blasphemy, and I have this to add—"

Rhys paused, stood up, made a gesture toward Caswallon and the council, watched Tros for the space of a dozen breaths with eyes that glittered coldly and resumed:

"That serpent's head curves upward from the ship's bow. It has a long tongue that projects and moves. It has eyes that are made of garnets. It has teeth that were taken from wild boars. And beneath it, at the ship's bow, there is the figure of a woman, carved by Cuchulain the minstrel, of the full size of a woman, painted blue but with the face pearl-colored, of crushed oyster-shell, the long hair golden and the head crowned. Unless rumor lies, the hair and the crown are both of solid gold. There are gold rings on the woman's fingers, that are folded on her breast.

"Now I accuse the Lord Tros of intending—mark you, I say, of intending—I do not say he has done so yet, though I reserve my full right to my own convictions—I say, of intending to incorporate a woman's soul into that figure of wood and metal!

"Why else should he tempt Cuchulain the minstrel to commit such sacrilege as to carve a human figure? * Why did he set free Boad, who was serving-maid to his own wife Helma, unless because he wished to sacrifice a free woman rather than a slave? Where is Boad?"

Rhys sat down, brushing a new drop from his nose-end with his sleeve, and there was a murmur. Men nodded their heads, at which Caswallon on the throne-chair chewed his long moustache. It was true, and all men knew it; Boad had mysteriously vanished.

Tros took two steps forward, so that he faced the semicircle and Caswallon in the midst. He was about to speak when Orwic, at Caswallon's right hand, put a word in.

"I accuse Rhys himself of having made away with Boad!"

Orwic crossed one leg over the other and leaned back in the carved and painted chair as if he thought the whole discussion a

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* The Britons made no use of the human form in their designs which, however, were of a very high artistic standard.

mere nuisance. Before Rhys could spring to his feet indignantly, with a bored air he had tossed another brand into the blaze.

"We all know how Rhys grew rich!"

Rhys stuttered indignation, stood up and sat down again. There fell an awkward silence, broken after a pause by Orwic's lazily amused voice:

"Rhys might fight me, if he dares!"

Then Tros, his face alight with sudden comprehension and assurance:

"Nay! That is my privilege! I know now why a slave came hinting to me that I might do well to go and visit the Lord Rhys by night! The slave, I remember, suggested I should bring no witnesses! So! I will give the Lord Rhys until sunset to produce Boad, my freed woman, alive and unhurt. If he should fail—"

But Rhys had left the council hall, slipping out behind his high-backed chair into the shadow and passing through the leather-curtained door into the vestibule where armed men saluted him with grounded spear-butts.

"Noblemen," said Tros, "I lost a young wife, through taking your part against Cæsar. I have claimed no recompense from you on that account, and as for Cæsar, he shall settle his own reckoning. I hired Cuchulain, the minstrel, who was taught in Gaul by Agoras, the Greek, to carve me a true likeness of my young wife for the ship's bow. So, it may be, neither ship nor I will act unworthy of her memory. Now you have heard the whole of it."

But though they had heard and believed, they were shocked by the idea of a carving of a woman. Rhys sent Boad to the shipyard before evening, but she brought a husband with her, who frowned her into silence, and who was so obviously a spy in Rhys's service that Tros turned both of them out into the rainy night. He might have canceled the girl's marriage had he chosen. As a freed woman, she was his ward and none might marry her without his leave. But he was heartily glad to be rid of the wench and gave her a sound boxing of the ears for marriage portion. So she went off and lied about him, claiming he had tried to exercise the age-old tyranny—and she already three weeks married.

That brought into play druidic prejudice. He went to see the druids to discuss the launching, and a middle-aged Lord Druid, recently promoted from the lower rank in the shuffle that had followed the death of the great Taliesan, took opportunity to lecture him on moral laxity, saying the druids could not countenance such practices or grant official recognition to a man suspected of them.

"For what will become of Britain, if we encourage strangers who do such things in our midst?"

But Tros knew he must have the druids at the ceremony, or risk disaster. There were too many men who would enjoy the opportunity to start a riot unless the launching should have druidic sanction.

"You shall come!" he retorted. "You are not such spiritual guides as was your teacher, the great Taliesan, or I would not dare speak to you in these terms. You are not men who possess the vision, or you would know that this woman's tale about me is a lie—as the great Lord Druid Taliesan would certainly have known without my telling him. He had wisdom, but not you! I say to you, you *shall* come!"

"I will curse you!" the graybeard answered. But the threat did not have the same effect on Tros that it would have produced on a native Celt—even on Orwic or Caswallon. Tros smiled and bowed with dignity more gracious than the druid's.

"I have seen curses," he answered, "that returned like bad money to the forger! Curse carefully, Lord-brother of the dragons! If Taliesan had cursed me, I should be a dead man now. But he blessed. You will come and bless my ship, and for this reason: That if you do not, I will take those pearls and, letting all men know who gave them to me, I will scatter them by the handful into the River Thames as my ship takes water. And I will say, 'Lo! These are druids' pearls, a druid's blessing.'"

Eyes met, and the druid knew that Tros was wilful enough to carry out that threat.

"Then," Tros continued, speaking slowly, "having no pearls, but having returned them to the water whence they came, I would not be under obligations to you. I would suit myself what action I should undertake next."

Taliesan the Great would have made short work of such a threat. But Tros knew he was dealing with no Taliesan. It was an ambitious, weak-willed hierarchy that had yielded to demands for treasure in the first place. Such were not the men to stand their ground and see wealth wasted, this old rumor-monger—this repeater of slave-girls' accusations, least of all.

"Your heart is bold and bad, Lord Tros," the druid answered. "But the evil dig their own pit. It is best we speed your going and soon see the last of you."

"Taliesan would never have made such a speech in my hearing," Tros answered.

More than ever he recognized weakness. He had built a ship, had drilled the odds and ends of flotsam of humanity into a crew of sorts, and knew that weakness is no good for a foundation. Unless discarded altogether, weakness must be beaten, pressed, hammered and backed up until it resists at last, and either breaks or is good for something.

"I am your ally," he went on, his amber eyes scanning their countenances that were stern but only masked irresolution. "Ye are willing to make use of me, but not to treat me as your friend. Now Taliesan, had he deigned to make use of me, would have reckoned my well being as important as his own. He would never have sent me forth without a full crew. He would have manned my ship with kings' sons, had I asked him. Nor would he have prayed to see the last of me. Taliesan would have said one of two things to me. Either, 'Thy heart is bad, so get thee hence!' or, 'How can I serve thee, thou who servest us?' And I would have asked him for a hundred freemen, ten from each of ten tribes, to increase my crew. Where is the cloak of Taliesan? Who wears it?"

His speech was received in silence. They withdrew into a corner to consult in whispers—nine gray-bearded men possessed of all the outer attributes of dignity, but with its cause lost. They did not know, they thought; they guessed; they were enamored of their own importance; they were echoes of a wisdom that had flowed through Taliesan but that did not penetrate beneath the crust of their ambition to be powerful.

"We must send to Mona," * the Lord Druid said at last. "Mona is the seat of our authority."

Tros struck his own breast. "Mine is in my heart!" he answered.

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* The modern Anglesea.

"So was the Lord Taliesan's. He would have said to me yes or no. He would have given me a crew of druids had he seen fit! And if he had sent a messenger to Mona or any other place, it would have been to say what he had done, not to ask whether it were right for him to do it! Speak ye your own minds. I listen."

So again they whispered in the corner, shaking heads and glancing at him where he stood in the dim whale-oil lantern-light, Tros realizing more and more, as they delayed to answer him, that something—though he could not guess what—had happened to provide him with an upper hand over them.

"They would like me dead!" he told himself. "Yet they love their holiness too much to cause me to be slain."

Decaying priesthoods, well he knew, are desperate and justify all evil done to prop up their own despotism. But he knew, too, decadence takes time. Great Taliesan was hardly three months dead; druids would hardly stoop to doing murder or procuring it until a score or so of years should overlie his influence.

"They have news. If I wait and persist, I will learn it," he assured himself. "They wish me gone. They are afraid of me. They dare not to offend me too much. Why?" he wondered, and he folded his arms, standing very erect, to await what the gods should bring forth.

"I see destiny in travail," he reflected.

Presently the new Lord Druid came toward him, fingering the golden sickle at his waist. The lamp-light shone on the yellow metal and on the druid's eyes, that were mild enough and not grown worldly, but betrayed doubt where there should have been assurance, built on inner strength. But instead of assurance there was arrogance of glance and gesture; and instead of strength there was ambition to appear strong.

"There are mysteries you may not know," he said, stroking his long beard.

"I can read your heart," Tros answered, and his hands were still.

He was like a rock, whereas the druid came at him like water feeling for a line of least resistance.

"But if we trust you with a secret—"

"That you will not do," Tros interrupted. "You know as well as I, that whoever tells a secret can not expect another man to keep it.

Therefore, whatever you will tell me, you will have decided first is not a real secret, but only something with which to mystify me. Speak. I listen."

"You remember King Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici?"

The druid's white hand continued stroking at his beard as he watched Tros's eyes. All Britain knew that Tros and King Gwenwynwyn of the withered arm were enemies. They had quarreled even in the presence of the mighty Taliesan. The lamp-light showed no change in Tros's expression; his frown dissolved into a fighting smile too slowly to be observed.

"Gwenwynwyn," said the druid, "went to Gaul and has returned. Gwenwynwyn spoke with Cæsar, who has pledged him friendship. Cæsar set a price on your head of three Roman talents, and Gwenwynwyn will offer the third of that to whoever shall kill you and bring your head to him."

"My head is worth more than three talents to Cæsar," Tros answered with a gruff laugh. "Gwenwynwyn should have made a better bargain!"

He was studying the druid's face now with all his power of intuition keyed up to the limit of alertness, although on the surface he was perfectly unruffled. It was not the news that puzzled him. To set a big price on his head was Cæsar's obvious recourse, and since his first success against Cæsar he had expected that. He had been absolutely sure of it since he and Caswallon took Cæsar captive and exchanged him against Fflur. But it was beyond his power to guess why the druids should reveal the information to him now.

"What you tell is not news to me. Why do you tell?" he answered.

The druid smiled with an air of superior knowledge—not as the great Taliesan would have smiled, for Taliesan took no delight in knowing more than other men.

"Gwenwynwyn has no army," he said, fingering the sickle at his waist. "But he is Cæsar's friend, and Cæsar has an army."

Tros let out one of his deep-chested monosyllabic laughs. "At Verulam," he said, "where I met Gwenwynwyn, he accused Caswallon of being Cæsar's friend and tried to persuade Taliesan to rebuke Caswallon for it."

The druid made a gesture of indifference, suggesting that Gwenwynwyn's treacheries were nothing new.

"Gwenwynwyn has no army," he repeated, "and he lives afar off in the west. He is afraid if he should cause you to be murdered, he would have to meet Caswallon's vengeance, for he knows Caswallon is your friend. It would be hard for Caswallon to march all the width of Britain with an army to attack him, but he knows Caswallon's energy in action just as surely as he knows his carelessness in repose. So he has made a stipulation to which Cæsar has agreed."

The druid paused and eyed Tros curiously. All the other druids gathered nearer, making no sound. They were like disembodied spirits, bearded faces framed in shadow.

"Cæsar is to send five hundred Spaniards to Gwenwynwyn's aid! They are to land in Dyvnaint * and to march to Merioneth.† They will be commanded by a Roman, but they are to obey Gwenwynwyn, whom they will defend if you should be slain and Caswallon should try to avenge you."

The druid paused again, drew in his breath and sighed.

"So you see, Lord Tros, you have brought invasion on us. You have brought on us the curse of foreign soldiers in our midst. Civil war may follow."

"But?" said Tros. "I can discern 'but' that lurks—to be discovered presently! What is it? Butt it forth!"

"The Spaniards have not yet started. To send them will cost Cæsar money. If either of two events should happen, Cæsar might not send those men."

"Aye," Tros answered, nodding, "if I were dead and Cæsar knew it, he might not send them. What is the other alternative?"

"If you were gone and Cæsar knew it— Go soon! Go soon, Lord Tros, and leave us to our own peace!"

Tros threw his head back and laughed.

"Nay, I will not go!" he retorted. "Nay, nay! Hah!" He began to pace the floor, both hands behind him, knotted fingers clenching and unclenching. "Five hundred men!" he muttered.

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* Cornwall or Devonshire.

† The only county in England or Wales that retains its ancient British name.

He had the news at last! Suddenly he turned and faced the druids.

"I will bargain with you!"

The Lord Druid appeared horrified. A blunt proposal to drive bargains was an insult to druidic dignity. Not yet, surely not yet, had they descended to such depths that they might not cover bargaining beneath a gloss of condescension. Nevertheless, beneath the horror Tros saw readiness to drive a bargain, should the terms of it appeal.

"We give or we withhold," the druid answered. "He who wears the golden sickle neither buys nor sells."

Tros made a gesture of concession. He would not split hairs of definition. He came bluntly to the point.

"I will go, and as soon as may be. I will make no more demands on you. But you shall keep my going secret. You shall tell Gwenwynwyn I will not go. You shall tell him—and no untruth, for you hear me threaten now—that you have heard me boast I will explore the coast of Britain in my ship, until I come to Merioneth where withered-arm Gwenwynwyn kings it in the woods! You shall take no steps to keep those Spaniards from coming. You shall leave that business to me. And meanwhile, you shall guard my life. You shall bless me publicly, that men may know I am not lightly to be murdered.

"You shall lend me countenance by coming to the launching of my ship with ceremonial procession and the minstrels and a choir. And if I send a man to Gaul," Tros added, with one of those swift afterthoughts that often mean more than the whole of what preceded them, "you shall give him secret introduction to the Gauls, to the end that they may help him to spy on Cæsar. That is all. Now, play the Taliesan for once! Say yes or say no. Say it only like men, that I may count with or without you."

The druids went again in a conference, whispering together where the darkest shadow fell beyond the heaped-up sacks of grain. Tros paced the floor, no longer thinking of the druids, knowing, because he understood their dread of foreign soldiers, that their answer would be yes.

"Five hundred men!" he muttered. "And Skell anxious to redeem himself! Hah!"

CHAPTER LVII

LIAFAIL

As a man is in his heart the sea reveals him to himself. Be he strong, the sea shall test him. Be he weak, the sea shall discover his weakness. Be he heedless, bold or cunning, or all three, the sea shall find him out and face him with his strength and weakness that he knew not.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

It was not yet dawn. Tros, sword on the table in front of him, sat by the fireside in darkness except for the flickering fire on the hearth and, the night being gusty, the room was filled with smoke that spread itself in layers. Conops, squatting by the hearth, baked bread for breakfast. Skell stood and faced Tros, eyes watering in the stinging smoke, and both men coughed at intervals.

"You are a fool," said Tros, "and an irksome problem to me. When you were my enemy, I laughed, but now I grieve because a fool is a danger to his friends and deadlier yet to his master."

"Lord Tros, you sent for me," Skell answered, shivering, for he was only half-clothed. "I think you did not send for me at this hour to call names or because sleep fails you. I take it, you will use my folly. I am willing."

Tros crashed the table with his fist and made the sword jump.

"Idiot! You cost me three men recently by giving the alarm when all my Britons bolted in the night. I had to swap three in exchange for three slain horses. Another year of your loyalty—and I am beggared!"

"Not so bad as that, Lord Tros! I saved all the stores. It was I who found the fire laid under the pitch-shed floor. I saved you nearly half-a-mile of hempen rope by—"

"Can you speak the Roman tongue?" Tros interrupted.

"Yes, my lord."

"And Gaulish?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Cæsar and many of his officers could recognize you?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then shave!"

Skell stared, but Conops found a razor and a pair of shears. Before Skell realized it, half his beard was gone.

"There, take the bacon rind and rub," said Conops irritably. "Rub it in well, unless you want your skin to be scraped off with the hair." Conops shoved to make him turn the unclipped half toward the firelight. "Spit on the rind! If it's too hard, chew it!"

Tros, in silence, watched the transformation. What had looked like obstinacy through the matted red mask now betrayed itself as a retreating chin accentuated by the big sharp nose. Skell looked ten years younger, and by ten of any measure less a danger to be reckoned with. By some trick of proportion now, his eyes looked much less cunning and more mild. Tros ordered Conops to trim the eyebrows.

"Not too much or he'll look disguised," he warned. "Now the hair at the back of the neck. Crop it half short."

Skell went and washed his face in the great lead bowl in the corner. Luckily he could not see himself, or the last dregs of his self-esteem would have drifted away with the smoke as Conops opened the shutters a trifle to judge what time it might be. Tros had to screw up his own courage before he could trust that weak-chinned specimen with any kind of mission. However, he had none else suited for his purpose. Glendwyr, for instance, knew no Roman.

"At any rate, Cæsar won't fear you," he remarked, as Skell returned to stand in front of him. "Are you afraid of Cæsar?"

"Aye!" said Skell, showing too much of the whites of his eyes.

Tros laughed. "A month ago you would have boasted that neither Cæsar nor any other man could frighten you! Because I am not afraid of Cæsar, I will send you to him."

Skell's jaw fell, increasing the effect of the retreating chin. His red-rimmed eyes grew narrower. Conops, heaping red-hot ashes on a bread pan, chuckled.

"Aye, I know," said Tros, nodding. "When I sent you to Cæsar before, you played fast and loose between him and me. He will scourge and crucify you if you are recognized. But you asked me for a chance to act the man, and now you may have it. I am going to give you money, my money, and this from the druids."

Tros showed him a fragment of parchment, not longer than a thumb joint either way, inscribed with heavy characters in black ink.

"If Romans should see this they would condemn you to death for possessing it. So swallow it if you are caught. But show it to any Gaul and, if he is a true Gaul, he will help you. You are to discover from which port, and when Cæsar is sending Spanish troops to Britain. By whatever means present themselves, you are to get exact information to me. Without betraying who you are or even that you know me, you are to start a rumor in Gaul in such way that it will reach Cæsar's ears as soon as possible, that I will remain in Britain all this year in order to help Caswallon against Cæsar should he attempt a new invasion."

"Am I myself to return to you with the information?" Skell asked.

"That is for the gods and your own wit to determine. I need the information more than I need you. You may return by fishing boat from Gaul or you may attach yourself to the Spanish troops and sail with them. They might need an interpreter, for instance."

"And how shall I reach Gaul?" Skell asked him.

"By chariot to Pevensey, where you will find a fisherman named Geraint who will take you to the Gaulish coast not far from Seine-mouth. You will only need to show him this druids' writing and he will obey you. Geraint, they tell me, is half Gaul, half Briton. He will remain over there in Gaul among the fisherfolk, and it may be he is the man to bring you back or to bring your news to me if you remain and travel with the troops. But he is not too trustworthy, since he loves the glint of money. I was cautioned by the druids as to that. So, if you use Geraint, he must not understand what he is doing. Nothing in writing. Nothing spoken that he could repeat to the Romans or a Roman spy."

Conops chuckled again, stirring cow's milk as he warmed it in the embers. Then he cracked six eggs into a frying pan and threw the shells into the fire with totally unnecessary violence. Tros nodded.

"Eggs," he said. "If Geraint or any other man from Gaul should bring me eggs, no Roman could interpret that. If he should say they are eggs of Spanish hens from Seine-mouth or from Caritia or from Caen or from Cariallum,* as the case may be, I would understand that the Spanish troops will sail from whichever port is thus indicated. Let each egg represent a day. Thus, if there were nine eggs, I would understand that the Spaniards will sail on the ninth day after the messenger set forth from Gaul.

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* The modern Cherbourg.

"Then you must tell me in how many ships they sail. So, lest the eggs be broken, you will wrap them carefully. If in three packages, then the Spaniards will sail in three ships. If in two, then in two ships. If each egg should be separately wrapped in wool, let that mean that the ships are unarmed merchantmen. But if the wrapping of each egg is of grass or straw, I will understand they sail in warships. But if they should sail in unarmed ships with warships for an escort, you will place the packages of eggs inside a basket, and that basket inside another one, and so on, to indicate how many warships. The stronger and bigger the baskets, the bigger and better armed I will understand those warships to be. Is all that clear to you?"

Skell nodded. He folded his arms. His delight in intrigue was offsetting the fear that kept his yellow teeth exposed.

"Now as to the Spanish troops' direction. It may be difficult to convey that information, but let us take the harbor of Dertemue* as the place where I will expect them unless there is news to the contrary. If they should sail to the westward of Dertemue, then include a duck's egg in the package. If to the eastward of it, then a dozen or so black hen's feathers. But if there should be two duck's eggs, then I will understand that they sail around the end of Britain to the west coast. Although the Romans are no sailors, so I think that course unlikely. Now, can you remember all that?"

Skell nodded again.

"How shall the messenger find you?" he asked. "Will you be here?"

"Not I! Nor will I tell you where I will be, since the wind and weather have a part to play. Nor can I spare Conops, for I have a crew of land crabs to be hammered into men with seamen's souls. I will send a man to Hythe, who will await you or your messenger. He will not know where to find me, for there are too many informers on the prowl, but I will find him."

Conops laid the fried eggs, bacon, hot bread and scalded milk on the table in front of Tros, pushing the sword out of the way and making a great clatter of plates and spoons. Dawn began to peer palely through the chink in the wooden shutters. Tros yawned and fell to at the food.

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* The modern Dartmouth.

"Go, eat. Clothe yourself. Be ready in an hour," he said to Skell, and Skell went out with a stride that alternated between cat-like caution and a swagger.

"Already he thinks he carries eggs!" said Conops, grinning. "You have chosen a weak agent, master!"

"Aye, and a poisonous bad cook!" Tros spat the bread out of his mouth. "You dog! You feed me ashes?"

"Wholesome, master! Good for your insides! Ashes—not much, just a little—fell into the dough. I couldn't help it."

"Ashes? Pluto rot you! It's a charred oak knot. Break my teeth, will you!"

Tros swallowed the hot milk, set down the beaker, took more of the alleged bread and rammed it into Conops' mouth, holding the Greek's head under his armpit, ramming in more and more with both his thumbs until the gag was solid. Then he buckled on his sword and strode out to the shipyard, where Sigurdsen, in two languages, was bellowing curses at a group of Britons who had knocked out the ratchet of a crane too suddenly and dropped a load of lumber on the ship's deck.

The sun was hardly over the skyline and the mist hung like washed wool over the river, but the whole yard was a-hum already with the orderly excitement of a task now nearly finished. There was a reek of hot pitch and a squeal of cordage as they rigged the tackles to the anchored buoys in mid-stream—sudden squalls of hammer-blows where Northmen in the ship's waist fitted up the berths. For Tros had carried innovation to the limit and provided a dry section of the hold wherein his ablest seamen might sleep comfortably and, aft of that again, an almost sumptuous saloon for his lieutenants. She was a wonder of a ship. She was to have a wonder-name bestowed on her at high noon. For a while Tros stood admiring her vermilion topsides, which had cost him a fortune in mercury and sulphur for the paint.

Orwic came, dew on his face, leaping along a chariot-pole and standing beside Tros almost before the long-maned stallions could plant their forefeet in the sod and bring the chariot to a clattering halt.

"Men!" he said, agape at the great ship's gleaming splendor, for Tros had made them polish up the tin against the launching. "Men! Men! Tros, what say you? Let us feed Northmen their own meat! Red rascals! They have raided our coasts since before the memory of man. Let's raid theirs for a change! Cross the North Sea, burn some villages, round up women and hold them until they trade us a man for them apiece! Northmen are better sailors than you'll ever find in Britain."

"No," said Tros.

"Why not? Lud's teeth! They've earned reprisals! We'd be doing favors to the gods by raping half-a-dozen homesteads!"

"I have enough Northmen," Tros answered. He knew better than to talk to Orwic about the ethics of honest raiding. Orwic would have hunted men as cheerfully as wolves. "Too many of a kind is worse than too few. I will be captain of my ship."

Orwic pushed the peaked steel cap back from his forehead, scratched his hair and looked at Tros curiously, as at a man who might be talking nonsense to conceal his thoughts.

"You have nearly two hundred Britons," he remarked. "They are used now to your eight-and-forty Northmen. If a mutiny should start, do you think Britons would take your side?"

Tros looked hard at him.

"When I studied the Mysteries," he said, "I was taught the properties of triangles. A triangle will carry more weight than a square and, with the weight on it, is not so easy to upset. You understand me?"

"No," said Orwic.

Tros, refraining from explanations, turned to greet Caswallon who arrived four-horsed, at full speed, with the morning sun behind him, gleaming on his flowing hair.

"To-day? Surely to-day?" Caswallon asked.

And when Tros nodded he drew him aside by the sleeve.

"I have a thought how you can get more men, but not a word to Orwic! You heard Rhys speak of the taxes from his district? Well, they are in arrear. Orwic is in debt to Rhys, who threatens a suit against him to prevent his sailing with you. If Orwic knew what I intend, he would probably go and kill Rhys, and I have too much trouble on my hands already without that. Listen now. Rhys comes to the launching, and his men will work a mischief to you if it can be managed. Be prepared."

"I am!" Tros answered, thinking of the chemical and Conops with his torch.

"Be prepared to bag Rhys! Trap him! Seize him!"

"Make a sailor of that raw-bones, that orator, that skin-a-louse?" Tros asked. "The Sea God would wreck me in fair weather for the insult to his waves!"

"No, no. I need Rhys. He can govern his district. But I need the taxes that he hasn't paid. Catch Rhys and accuse him of anything. Demand from him fifty men. Your Northmen must pounce on his escort, and it won't much matter if they happen to kill a few. I will have some of my bowmen placed where they can keep the public from taking sides. Rhys will appeal to me, of course, and I will refuse to do anything about it until he pays the tribute money.

"But I think—for I know Rhys—that if you should hold him fast, but let him send a messenger, he will attend to it that the tribute money is paid before he appeals to me. I will then demand from him a heavy fine, both for having been slow with his payment and for having started a riot in your shipyard. I will demand a fine that I know he can not pay. He has too many armed men in his district, so I will let him pay in men instead of money. Those men you shall have for your ship, friend Tros, and I will see to it that they are good ones. Thus we do each other a good turn. But don't tell Orwic. Rhys is threatening to seize his property and hold his person. Orwic would certainly kill him if he knew there was going to be a good opportunity."

Tros demurred. Like Caswallon, he had too much trouble on his hands without courting more. And besides, he wanted no more Britons in his crew, particularly unwilling ones.

"I am admiral of Cæsar's fleet," he said, frowning, but with a smile behind his eyes. "Lend me a two-horse chariot to send to Pevensey and I will get all the men I need without having to pick bones with Rhys."

Caswallon stared at him.

"Men from Pevensey?"

"From Gaul! According to my admiral's appointment, written over Cæsar's seal, I have full right to levy men, and no Roman may refuse me."

"Tell me about that later. I need the tribute money," said Caswallon. "Catch me this fellow Rhys."

Tros's eyes grew narrow as he scanned Caswallon's face.

"You are a king," he answered. "Kings forever speak in riddles. But are you and I on such terms? Speak me frankly. Is it likely, think you, I would refuse you an act of friendship even with my own hands full?"

Caswallon's mouth moved nervously beneath the long moustache, but that was the only sign he gave that there was a deeper intrigue beneath the one he had proposed.

"For you—for your sake I will catch Rhys," Tros continued, watching him. "For myself, I have no need of him nor of his men."

He did not believe for a minute that Orwic would kill Rhys simply because he owed Rhys money. Orwic was wealthy; easily could pay his debts before he sailed.

"King—aye, I am a king," Caswallon answered wearily. "I hate the sea, and yet I envy you your ship. Catch Rhys for me. I need him caught. Yes, you shall have the chariot for Pevensey. But why?"

"I send a messenger to Cæsar!"

"Are you mad, Tros?"

"I am Cæsar's admiral. I need men. I will have them."

"Rede me that riddle!"

"Rede me yours first," Tros retorted. "Aye, I will catch Rhys for you. But why?"

"Leave my shame hidden in my heart, Tros. Pride is a king's one solace for the sweat of ruling people."

Tros eyed him gravely, hands behind his back, frown slowly changing into a smile.

"I, too, am not without pride," he retorted. "I am your friend. I will do as you wish. But would you make a mere blind accomplice of me? Have I ever violated confidence?"

"Lud's teeth! I hate to tell you," said Caswallon. "Rhys is a member of my council. He is a lord of Britain, and you are our guest, not only mine. I wish to save Rhys from a crime that would bring shame on all of us."

"And Orwic is not to know, because he would kill Rhys if he did?"

Tros nodded. He began to comprehend. He had had a dozen opportunities to learn how sacred the Britons held their law of hospitality and he knew, too, that, though killing is a simple matter, kingdoms are not preserved by killing. He could understand how Rhys, reduced to impotence, might cease to be a danger to the state, whereas his death might loose such reins of vengeance as should start a civil war. And he understood how shame would devour Caswallon if a member of the council should by any treachery cause disaster to the country's guest.

"I will catch Rhys," he repeated.

And he held a mental reservation that from Rhys himself he would learn Caswallon's secret, quite confident meanwhile that information would confirm his own guess.

Caswallon drove away to send the chariot for Skell and Tros made rearrangements in the shipyard, going about it cautiously, because there were already scores of spectators pressing their faces against the picket fence, awaiting admission.

A last look at the ship convinced him there could be no trouble with the launching. A dozen blows to knock the chocks from under her, perhaps a few turns on the great bronze screw to lift her bow end, and she would glide down the ways into her element. He could spare thirty Northmen, and they were free men, entitled to carry arms. None could charge them with crime if they should defend the yard, however desperately, against rioters, whoever those rioters might be.

But he kept the Northmen near the waterfront, concealing them inside a low shed about fifty yards from the ship and nearly midway to the outer fence, warning them what to expect and forbidding them to use sharp-edged weapons unless their first surprise assault with pick handles and capstan bars should fail.

"It is worse to be clubbed than to be knifed," he admitted, "but it causes less public comment. Let us shed no blood if we can help it."

Then he laid the trap for Rhys by covering the ways with cloth about ten feet in front of the ship's stern, and so arranging grass beneath the cloth that any one looking for that might suppose an unconscious human victim had been tied in readiness for the ship to crush to pulp as it slid stern first into the water.

The Lord Rhys came betimes, forcing his way through the crowd at the gate with twenty men behind him and ignoring Conops who bade him wait and give Caswallon precedence. Behind Rhys and his followers the whole crowd flowed into the yard, and if it had not been that Caswallon arrived next, with Fflur and fifty archers, there might have been a riot there and then, because Tros's Britons tried to keep the crowd within the enclosure he had roped off, and freemen resented interference from the slaves. However, the archers solved that problem, extending themselves at intervals outside the rope, stringing their bows suggestively.

Soon nearly all the members of the council came, each with his following of armed retainers. Tros had seats for the principal lords and ladies and, after a great deal of shouting, the retainers were all crowded to the rear within easy reach of the secreted chemical that, should Conops touch the torch to it, could reduce them to helpless panic. An hour before high noon there were more than a thousand people in the yard, chattering and staring at the mysterious linen sheet that covered the great ship's figurehead.

Long before the druids came it was evident that Rhys had trouble in his sack and meant to loose it at his own good time. He alone of all the noblemen was truculent, objecting to his seat behind the rope, nervous and argumentative because his men were herded away from him, sarcastic because Caswallon and Fflur had better seats, impatient of delay and rising from time to time to peer as far as he could see around the ship. Tros had placed him carefully. At last, straining his neck, he detected the shape of a human victim shrouded under canvas on the ways.

Instantly he was on his feet and was about to announce his discovery at the top of his lungs, but he checked himself. Blackmailer by profession, he foresaw more profit to himself from crime committed than from its exposure in advance. Instead of saying what he saw he cried out to Tros to come and speak with him and, nothing loath, Tros strode up looking splendid in his purple cloak trimmed with cloth-of-gold and ermine.

"Lord Tros," said Rhys, "there should be proof that no human sacrifice is made to-day. It is in your interest that somebody should stand near to the ship—some man of repute, myself, for instance, to take oath afterward that there were no black rites performed out of sight of the druids."

"None better than you, Lord Rhys!" Tros answered. "Everybody knows you are not my friend. If you can find nothing against me, none can! Come along."

But Rhys refused to come without his men.

"You mean, don't you, you are not my friend!" he retorted. "I would not trust myself alone within reach of your engines of destruction."

"Bring them then. Bring them by all means," said Tros with a laugh and a gesture of lordly carelessness that mightily offended Rhys. But at sight of the gesture Conops pulled a string that warned the Northmen in the shed to hold themselves in readiness.

The interested buzz-note of the crowd changed into a half roar of excitement as Tros strode beside Rhys to the ship with all of Rhys's men in a double line behind them looking businesslike. There was even jealousy, expressed in catcalls. Was Rhys to have the special honor of a close-up view of the launching? Why? There were Caswallon and a hundred others better entitled to that than Rhys! There was even an effort to follow them down to the ways and Caswallon's archers had their hands full checking it until a blare of music in the distance announced that the druids were coming downstream in their swan-necked barges. They came very slowly on the slack tide, chanting, and the crowd grew still, spell-bound by the beauty of the scene, for the sun shone on the gilded swans and on the gilded oar blades. And in the river's bosom there were mirrored white clouds mingled with the limpid blue.

"Lord Rhys," said Tros, "I am minded you shall do your spying thoroughly. First look at this."

He led him to the canvas on the ways and raised it, showing dry grass underneath. Then, before Rhys could recover from that disappointment—

"Let your men look into that shed," he suggested.

It was a double shed, with a long partition down the middle, and there were no windows, so it was dark inside. Several of the men peered in, reported nothing, but Tros refused to be satisfied.

"Let them examine it," he insisted. So Rhys, to save his own face, ordered them into the shed, retaining only six to guard himself.

"And while they search within there," Tros said, "you and I and these others will search the ship for such victims as you think I immolate. Up that ladder!"

As Rhys turned to look at the ladder Tros shut the shed door quietly and slid the bolt. And as he did that Sigurdsen came glooming up with nine men, all armed with hammers, who placed themselves with their backs to the shed and began a prodigious pounding on a hollow log, breaking it up, and for no reason in the world unless it might be pagan pleasure at the noise. They made such thunder that if there had been a battle royal in the shed, none could have heard it.

"Up you go. That way," Tros said, pointing.

The ladder was a wide one, resting on a scaffold with a platform at the top that hardly touched the ship's side, so that there was no need to remove it for the launching. Rhys, half suspicious of a trap, began to climb it, hesitated, and continued when he saw Tros standing at the bottom, back turned toward him, seemingly considering the druids who were anchoring their seven barges in a line across the river nearly a hundred yards below the course the ship would take.

At exactly high noon Rhys stood on the platform, startled by the fanfare of the druids' golden trumpets; that, and the sudden silence by the shed door as the hammer swinging ceased. Sigurdsen and six men sprang up the ladder. Tros did not wait to watch them hustle Rhys and his six over the ship's side and down into the hold. He ran, four Northmen following, toward the ship's bow, blowing his silver whistle and, while they and the others who were waiting chopped and hammered at the chocks, he pulled the cord that held the sheet in place over the ship's figurehead.

"Oh, *Liafail!*" he cried, and all men heard that wonder name, but the rest of what he said was swallowed by the crack of breaking timber, like explosions, as the ship's weight broke inertia.

There was movement, nigh invisible at first, increasing inch by inch. The crowd roared and the druids' trumpets blared. The sheet fell away from the figurehead, revealing Helma's image, blue, with golden hair and crown, and above that the great glittering serpent's head, whose tongue moved on a gymbal, flashing four ways in the sun.

Slowly, and then with a roar like the sound of an avalanche, to the blare of trumpets and the thunder of a hundred war drums, the ship slid down the ways until she shoved the reeking mud in waves to either side of her, pitched like a horse impatient of the bit, so that her serpent looked like a living dragon with a tongue of fire, rocked into mid-stream and lay rolling to the taut, complaining cables that had ripped the buried anchors ten feet forward through the earth. The druids' barges rocked in obbligato to the big ship's roll, as a hymn swelled forth across the river, praising Lud, the God of the River Thames, whose bosom bears the big ships to the ocean and the storms and deep-sea destiny.

Tros laughed. He could not help but laugh to see his vision launched at last, his dream of dreams, his masterpiece that lay so graceful and enormous on the water—too high yet, for there were the ballast and the stores and water to be loaded; but exactly, to the inch, as he had known she would ride—bow high like a war-horse, with a flare to throw off head-seas, and as naturally even on her keel as if the gods had balanced her.

"Oh, *Liafail!* Gods govern you! I am a man at last!" He laughed and clapped his hands together. "No blood! No man, no beast slain at the launching! Hah!"

Then suddenly he thought him of the shed and went and shot the bolt back from the door. His Northmen came forth one by one, each with his weapon sheathed, but each with a pick-handle or an ax-helve in his hand. He counted them and they were all there, but some limped, and they all looked more or less the worse for what had happened in the dark.

"How many?" he demanded, gesturing toward the shed. He had to ask twice, because the Northmen stared in silent admiration at the great ship they had toiled to build.

"Oh, some are dead and some are tied. They fought. One way or another we did for all of them. I killed two, for they had skulls like eggs," a Northman answered, then turned his head again to stare and grin at the great ship.

Tros did not enter the shed just then. He was wondering whether the ship was actually launched before the blood flowed.

"Blood!" he muttered. "Blood is not good at a ship's launching. I should have had a druid cast her horoscope. I should have chosen another hour, another day. But a slack tide at high noon seemed auspicious. Blood!"

He determined not to see the blood just then at any rate. He closed the shed door, turned his back and walked away. A vague uneasiness troubled him, but he steeled his mind to forget this seemingly bad omen.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE LORD RHYS

I am a mystic. That is why I love action. I know that what I see I can never attain unless I now do what I can and thereon step to something nobler.

I have never known a coward or a scoundrel who did not believe a mystic is a fool of whom he could take advantage. But who has seen the result? Where is it?

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Caswallon cleared the yard to some extent by leading the way out of it with Fflur. Numbers of the younger people followed Orwic through the same gate, joking with him about his rumored intention to sail in the monster ship with Tros. But a number remained who defied Caswallon's archers, hanging about the yard in disappointment at the shortness of the spectacle and hoping something else might transpire presently to make the waste of half a day worth while. There were sheds to be peered into, cranes to examine, the splinters to see on the ways where the great ship had slid riverward, scandalous waste of floating grease to be appalled at, and questions to ask of the slaves who were glad enough to talk if any one would listen to them.

But Tros blew his whistle three times sharply, and at that signal Conops fired a pound or so of dampened chemical beneath a covering of sawdust. Ominous spluttering, flame, yellow and black smoke, and then the choking stench blew crosswise of the yard, and in a minute it was empty of archers as well as visitors, all racing for the trees beyond the fence. Tros's slaves, now used to the appalling stuff, took refuge to windward, in their own long sheds, whither Tros betook himself to roust out nine of them to make up a boat's crew. Ten minutes later he had climbed the *Liafail's* high stern and stood there for a minute watching Sigurdsen bandage a wound on a Northman's forearm and then put grease on a bruise on the same man's head.

"Blood!" he muttered. "Blood again. Not good! Where's the Lord Rhys?"

Sigurdsen showed him. Rhys sat fuming in the fore part of the after deckhouse, where the V-shaped slits of openings gave command of a whole broadside to the arrow-engines, covered under canvas now. Rhys's wrists were lashed behind him to two rings in the deckhouse wall and his feet were stretched so tightly toward a table leg that he could hardly sit on the narrow bench. His weapons were gone, but he was unharmed—only shaken, ruffled and indignant.

"Where are his men?" Tros asked.

"One's overboard—took a capstan-bar under the chin," said Sigurdsen. "The rest are only stunned. They're in the fore-peak, under hatches."

"Loose him."

Sigurdsen obeyed, and Rhys chafed tingling wrists while Tros kicked at his own scabbard as a hint that he was master of the situation.

"You will pay for this!" Rhys snapped at him, and blew his long nose with his fingers. The effect was exactly as if he had spat, and Tros changed his mind abruptly how to deal with him.

"Pay, shall I?" he retorted. "Whom?"

"Me!" Rhys answered. "You will pay me! I am a member of the council!"

Tros rubbed his iron jaw.

"Sit down!" he commanded, for Rhys had risen as if to snap defiant fingers at him. "Now, I don't know what you ever did, Lord Rhys, to earn the right to live, but you may earn my leave this minute or become a million pieces in the bellies of a million fish!"

"Your—your leave!" Rhys stammered.

He was furious. It had not dawned on his imagination yet that Tros might dare to kill him.

"You would better offer me a price, Lord Tros! You bilked me in the matter of the slaves, but, believe me, this time you shall pay, or I know nothing!"

"Tell what you know. That is the price I set," Tros answered. "Come along now. Out with it! The Lord Caswallon begged your life of me, saying you are a member of the council who should be spared if possible. I promised him your life on one condition."

"You! You will never dare murder me!" Rhys stammered.

It was beginning to dawn at last. Caswallon's name had startled him.

"Dare—yes! But do it—no! Unless you tell me what I wish to know, although I know it—but it will please me to hear it from your lips—you shall fight me, or whichever champion I name. I think I will name Sigurdsen, who hasn't killed a man in weeks and needs practice. Sigurdsen fights with an ax. Now, which will you? Fight or speak? You may send a message to Caswallon if you wish."

Rhys grew a whole shade paler. He had counted on appealing to Caswallon. The mere threat of what Caswallon would be forced to do by way of vengeance if a member of his council should be harmed, he had supposed would be enough to bring Tros to his senses.

"I may send—then you mean—the—the Lord Caswallon is a party to this outrage?"

"He has begged your life," Tros answered. "I have named the terms to him—that you must tell me all you know."

"About what? You have a charge against me?"

"Yes," said Tros, "I charge you with plotting to destroy me in league with Gwenwynwyn, king of the Ordovici! Cæsar set a price of three Roman talents on my head. Gwenwynwyn will pay a third of that to whoever delivers my head to him. Now, make a clean breast of it or fight!"

"Slay him, Lord Tros!" urged Sigurdsen. "I would liefer spare a wolf at lambing time! Here—let me have at him! There are no witnesses."

"You hear what he says?" grinned Tros. "You would have had my life. How did you propose to have it?"

Rhys had his doubts of Tros's willingness to kill in cold blood, but no man could have doubted Sigurdsen who, if necessary, could be made the scapegoat afterwards. That argument stared self-revealed out of his frightened eyes.

"What do you want me to tell?" he demanded. "What if I tell? What then?"

Tros had not answered when the thump of oars alongside announced the arrival of Caswallon in a boat rowed by his own retainers. He came alone into the deckhouse, eyed Rhys coldly for as long as sixty breaths, said nothing and walked out again, slamming the door behind him.

"The Lord Caswallon has his own fish to skin with you. He wishes to know nothing about mine," said Tros. "We will pick mine first. Unfold the plot between you and Gwenwynwyn!"

Rhys capitulated, deathly fear behind his eyes, convinced at last that he was wholly at Tros's mercy. He kept licking his lips as he spoke.

"There is no plot between me and Gwenwynwyn, who is a coward and a fool. It is true that Cæsar offered him three talents for your head, but he is afraid to kill you for fear of Caswallon's vengeance, even though Cæsar is sending him five hundred soldiers to protect him. So Gwenwynwyn sent his minstrel to me with a promise of one third of the money if I would send him your head in a basket.

"Lord Tros, I believe you to be a public enemy. It is no disgrace to me that I determined there and then for legal cause to have you executed. But why should I share the reward with Gwenwynwyn? I could take your head to Cæsar, couldn't I? And I would do no murder. Gods forbid that I should murder any man! But to seize a public enemy and lay a proven charge against him, whether of human sacrifice or what else, to cause him to be executed and to take his head to Cæsar to prove he is dead, and thus to remove one of Cæsar's excuses for making war on us—that would be a service to my country. Lord Tros, your heart, if you have one, must tell you I am right. There would be no disgrace if I should make a profit for myself by ridding my country of a dangerous alien, such as I hold you to be."

"No, no!" Tros commented. "Not you! No, you could not be disgraced that easily! However, you are my prisoner. Your men attacked mine."

"They did not!" Rhys interrupted, blazingly indignant.

A false charge against himself aroused the uttermost depths of his resentment.

"Your men attacked mine in the shed down yonder by the waterside," Tros continued, making up his story to fit the circumstances, stroking his jaw with his right hand, head a little to one side. "You planned to have your men seize me. That is why you tried to decoy me on board my ship, you mounting the ladder and turning to tempt me to follow, as all men saw! Caswallon saw it. All the council saw it, and their wives and all the public! Everybody saw your men invade my shed."

"It is a lie!" Rhys snarled.

"Maybe. Maybe. It is something like what you intended, though it happened I was ready for you, and your plan failed."

"I say it is a lie!"

"I heard you. But it is also a lie that I intended human sacrifice. It is a lie that I am a public enemy. And it is not a lie that you are my prisoner. What do you propose to do about it?"

"I? Nothing! What should I do?"

"No offer you would care to make?"

"You mean money? I—"

"You could offer, for instance, to tell me what arrangements you agreed on between Cæsar and Gwenwynwyn, in the event that Cæsar should pay those three talents for my head! How many men will you provide to help Cæsar against Caswallon when the invasion comes? How many chariots? How many horses? Bah! I know your breed! There are rascals such as you in all lands—liars who can lie within a hair's breadth of the truth, plotters who can plot under a mask of loyalty, law breakers who can make the law a whip for other men. Lud's blood! If I were king in Britain I would whip your head off faster than a cook kills chickens!"

Tros strode to the door, opened it and nodded to Caswallon, who came in, this time followed by a pair of gentlemen-at-arms.

"Rhys, these are witnesses," he said. "I charge you that the tribute money is near two years in arrear. I charge you that you tried to start a riot in the shipyard yonder, where a thousand saw your men invade Tros's shed. I fine you double of the tribute money. And for your lawless conduct in the shipyard you shall pay ten chariots with bronze wheels, a hundred four-year-old horses, a hundred bronze swords, a hundred bronze spear-heads, a hundred shields, a hundred sets of harness, a hundred yew bows, two thousand arrows, bronze-tipped, wild goose-feathered, a hundred helmets, two thousand yards of woolen cloth, a thousand ewes, a hundred steers, and ten farms—those that lie nearest Lunden!"

Rhys stared blankly.

"That is all I have!" he said in an awed voice.

"No, not all. Not quite all. But enough to keep you chastened for a while!" Caswallon answered, nodding.

Rhys exploded.

"I appeal! You have no legal right to fine me! This is a monstrous fine for nothing! It is plunder! I defy you! I demand a trial before the council!"

"Shall I leave you to the Lord Tros?" Caswallon asked, raising his eyebrows. "Rhys, Rhys, I am ashamed! If I were not an easy-going king I would have slain you long ago. I spare you because you rule your district, though you rule it over-harshly. But I will not trust you until that fine is paid, because I know you have plotted with Cæsar and Gwenwynwyn. Spare me, then, the deeper shame of having to expose you."

He turned his back to give Rhys time to think. There was no shame on Rhys's face, only calculation of the odds against him and a cold, pragmatic selfishness.

"I will pay," he said, catching his breath. It hurt him more to say it than a whipping would have done.

"I will see that you do!" Caswallon answered, turning again to face him. "Tros, I saw Rhys's steward climb the ladder with him. Where is he now?"

"In the fore-peak unless he was the man who fell overboard."

"Let the steward be brought. Rhys, you will send your steward, giving orders to him in my presence to bring the doubled tribute money and the fine in full to Lunden. When the whole of it is paid the Lord Tros will release you and as many of your men as have not been killed through your own treachery. Tros, can you keep Rhys safe without fetters?"

Tros nodded.

"Sigurdsen shall nail him into an empty water-cask, and he shall stay in darkness in the ship's hold until you send me word to loose him. As for his men in the shed down yonder—"

"They are yours!" Caswallon interrupted. "They are not bad fighting men. They are Rhys's best. Bring them here and put a hatch on them until the ship sails."

Tros demurred.

"They are not slaves," he objected. "They will simply run at the first chance, and meanwhile I shall have to handle them with capstan bars. There'll be trouble enough without—"

"Chain them to the oars!" Caswallon urged.

Tros shook his head. He knew, from long experience of ships in the Levant, the uselessness of that procedure. Men chained to the oars die of heart-break, and the work they do is not worth food and whip. Even the Romans realized it and, except in the case of punished criminals, never chained men at the galley benches.

"Throw them into Lunden jail," he answered.

"But I thought you must have men?"

"I must. But I have other men in mind."

Caswallon strode out of the deckhouse, beckoning Tros to follow.

"Brother Tros," he said, taking his arm outside the door, "I can not put men in Lunden jail without bringing them to trial except in cases of high treason and rebellion. Even for high treason or rebellion, I must have the council's affirmation."

"Then let them go," said Tros.

"*Tchutt!* They would try to rescue Rhys. Rhys is known to be rich. I must reduce Rhys's riches drastically before I can afford to turn those men loose. Bring them aboard the ship."

Tros laughed.

"I have made no bargain yet with Rhys," he answered. He returned into the deckhouse, where Rhys sat glowering at Sigurdsen.

"Rhys—"

"I am the Lord Rhys to my enemies!"

"Lord Rhys, I have no notion how many of your men are still alive in yonder shed, but as many as live are my hostages. I will keep them aboard this ship until I am out of reach of your poisoners, your arrows, your informers. If, when you have paid the Lord Caswallon's fine and I have set you free, you do me no annoyance of whatever kind, you shall have those men back, subject to their good behavior as well as yours. So you would better warn them, even as I will. When I have no further use for them as hostages, say a month from now, or a few days more or less, and provided you have done me not an injury meanwhile, I will set them free somewhere on the coast of Britain, each with his weapon and a little journey money, and they may find their own way back to you. Is that clear?"

Rhys nodded, scowling.

"You understand me? Fully? Very well then. Bring his steward, Sigurdsen. After the steward has received instructions, nail Rhys up in the water-cask and let Northmen stand watch over him in two-hour tricks. Rhys, Lord Rhys, you would better bid your steward make haste. It will be dark there in the hold. A water cask is big, but not a pleasant place to spend a week in. Fall away, Sigurdsen. I'll watch him while you bring the steward."

CHAPTER LIX

THE LORD RHYS'S TENANTRY

There is a true measure by which to judge any captain's value. Is he fat, and are his led men hungry? Is he at ease, and are they weary? Is he in receipt of dignities, and is their lot humiliation? Does he bribe them to obtain obedience? Is he revengeful; is he afraid to punish, lest worse happen?

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

STORES began coming aboard that afternoon, although the slaves claimed holiday to celebrate the launching. Tros did not dare to waste minutes now. Hours might make the difference between catching Cæsar's Spaniards in mid-channel or being obliged to land and fight them somewhere on the British coast. At sea, the odds were in his favor, supposing he could lick that crew of his into anything like shape. On land, five hundred Spaniards under a Roman officer would have it all their own way, as against himself with only eight-and-forty Northmen, Orwic and perhaps a few of his retainers and as many of his British slaves as he might dare to form into a landing party.

Men, men, men! He must have men! That song was singing in his brain while they towed the *Liafail* alongside the light pier he had constructed, and all the rest of that day until midnight. He drove the slave gangs mercilessly. Endless streams of food, stores, water, ammunition, tools, spare sails and cordage poured into their appointed places, and the Northmen labored at the stowing, each man in charge of one section of the hold.

The risk of fire made Tros's skin creep. He was everywhere, cautioning torchmen, alert and anxious. Glendwyr with a bucket gang and another gang in readiness to man the great chain-pump, stood watch amidship, and there were boxes of wet sand set wherever there was room for them. Conops in person stowed the leaden balls filled with mixed explosive in the magazines below the four great catapults, and in other magazines beside those, tons of charcoal, resin, sawdust, sulphur and that other strange ingredient from under the horse manure in the cave below Caswallon's stables.

By midnight, because Tros had foreseen everything, the stores were stowed, the lights were out, the slaves asleep on bunks beside the staggered oar benches and the hatches, covered with pitched canvas, in position. All lay snug and tight against the rain that drummed on the upper deck. The shrouds were slackened; the ship was again in mid-stream riding to her own bronze anchor with a cowhide parceling on the warp, and the shipyard deserted. The Northmen—they were Tros's marines, berthed for his protection between his stateroom under the poop and the rows of bunks on which the rest of the crew slept—snored in their own snug quarters. Conops, yawning at the anchor watch, cried, "All's well!" It was a day's work to be proud of, and a night of nights—the first afloat!

But the more Tros thought, the more he gloried in the great ship's size and her proportions and the novelty and skill of her design, the more he wondered at success, the more the fact oppressed him that he must have men, men, men.

On either side of the ship there were three banks, each for fifty oars. He had less than two hundred Britons. It was just conceivable that his eight-and-forty Northmen were enough to handle, reef, steer and provide the necessary boatswains, two lieutenants and two oar captains, one for each side of the ship. But of the Britons, ten were needed for the cooking and such details. Ten more were not more than enough to keep the ship comparatively clean. And though the druids had given him a kegful of pungent smelling extract that they said would keep the smallpox and the harbor plague away, he knew cleanliness as all essential. He had seen too many ships rot, crew and all, of their own foulness.

Then, the wear and tear aloft would be too prodigious, and would call for constant overhauling, for he had not only three masts, in itself an innovation, but three topmasts, his own bold, original invention, and a corresponding maze of rigging. Under sail he did not doubt he would have speed enough to run from any Roman on the seas but, failing wind, he would need at least another hundred and fifty oarsmen, to allow for a few sick men and a few reliefs. And even so, there would be no men to spare to man the catapults, the arrow-engines and to stand off boarders.

Men! He must have men swiftly, and at least two hundred. Moreover, they must not be Britons, or the risk of mutiny would be too great. He laughed to think that Cæsar should send Spaniards from Gaul exactly at the moment when he needed them. He scowled when he thought of the weakness of his untrained crew.

"The gods," he told himself, "enjoy a man's alertness. They are offering me opportunity."

He did not pray to the gods. He knew better. Such prayer as he put forth was will to seize the moment, action, effort and self-watchfulness.

Nor had he qualms about the Spaniards, who were surely not yet slaves. They were men, presumably, who hired themselves to Cæsar for his purposes; expecting, in addition to their pay, such loot and opportunities for license as his victories should provide. In Tros's view of things, that made them his fair prey. He respected no man's liberty unless the man himself respected other people's. A soldier fighting for the freedom of his own land, he admired, he loved; a mercenary in the pay of an invader he considered no more than a prostitute to Cæsar's will, no more to be treated as a free man with a free man's rights than cattle need be.

But how to get those Spaniards! First, by hook or crook, he must instil enthusiasm into his untrained British oarsmen, and then train them—no small miracle! Thereafter, making out of Thames-mouth for the open sea, he must give his Northmen practice in the handling of the ship before he could dare to engage Cæsar's warships, clumsy and ill-handled though the Roman biremes might be. He must cruise along the coast and run in to find Skell's messenger. And if, as was all too likely, Skell should fail him, he must cruise down-channel searching for the Spaniards, trusting to the gods to show them to him.

"Zeus!" he muttered. "How I'd love a crew of Romans! Give me enough Romans and I'd purge Rome! But they won't follow a man who doesn't believe that Rome is right whatever Rome does."

If he would go to Rome to plead Caswallon's cause he must have men with him who would regard Rome as their natural enemy, or at least not as their mother city, and who, in consequence, would not desert in the hope of finding easier servitude ashore. He was sure of his Northmen and Britons. He was nearly sure the Spaniards would have had their bellyful of Cæsar and would be complacent about changing masters.

He slept not at all that night, but paced the poop with the blustering rain in his face, using himself to the feel of the ship underfoot, to her length and breadth, to her height above the water—absorbing her into his consciousness.

When dawn at last sent shafts of golden light along the river, touching the great serpent's trembling tongue, Tros greeted it, arms folded, on the poop and laughed along the deck to Conops who came sleepily off watch to urge him to turn in and rest.

"These Britons of ours will tax you, master! Sleep before the trouble starts!"

"It has begun!" Tros answered, glancing at the river. "Turn out all the Northmen!"

There were two-score boats already coming up-stream, loaded full of traders and olla-podrida of Thames' side.

"Watch that no slave goes overboard, and stand those boats off with arrow-fire if need be! Let no boats but Orwic's or Caswallon's come alongside."

It was an ancient game, as old as navigation, to approach a ship about to sail and tempt her crew with promises of shore work and high wages. Her master, then, had the alternative of long delay while he pursued deserters or of putting to sea short-handed, leaving his slaves to become the property of whoever had tempted them ashore.

He began to be angry with Orwic for keeping him waiting; angry with Caswallon because he knew it was Caswallon who had feasted Orwic all night long, and that both of them were probably dead drunk; angry with a longshore crowd that was already looting in the shipyard, breaking up the sheds and carrying off in ox-carts and on men's heads every stick that was removable. But more than all else, he was angry because the boats were there and he must make the first experiments with the oars before an audience of critics who would laugh.

He ate breakfast without appetite, then ordered an anchor out over the stern and let the ship swing down-stream.

"Man the benches!" he commanded, scowling at the onlookers. If he had thought they would accept a reasonable sum he would have paid them all to go away.

First came babbling confusion while the Britons were selected, bench by bench, for reach of arm, known courage or faint-heartedness; and a mark was painted on each man to correspond to the bench on which he was to sit and on the oar he was to use.

The business took two hours, and no one was satisfied. The upper-bank men grumbled at the length and weight of the oar they had to pull; the lower-bank men cried for head room, air, view, noisily asserting fear that waves would enter through the lower oar-ports.

"Whip!" Tros thundered. "Whip for the man who speaks again until I give leave!"

There had not been much whip hitherto in Tros's mixed methods of maintaining discipline. A sudden onslaught by the Northmen leaping along the gang-planks by the benches and the cracking of leather whips on naked shoulders produced more effect than if the Britons had been used to it. There was silence and a long pause.

One by one, then, the Northmen showed the rowers what would be expected of them at the signal.

Wand in hand on the poop, Tros stood where the drum and cymbal men could see him. They were stationed forward, under the break of the high bow, protected from the weather, cautioned never, for any reason, to take their eyes off the officer of the watch. Tros gave the signal—

"Ready!"

Drums and cymbals crashed three times, and the oars, after a lot of shouting by the Northmen, moved into position ready for the dip. Again and again Tros repeated the signal, Conops running along the gang-planks, moving and readjusting oar-handles until all the vermilion blades were poised exactly evenly above the water. Then, setting the time slowly for the drums and cymbals, he made them move the oars in air until the rowers caught the rhythm and began to swing in unison. A cymbal-crash began the swing. A drum-beat finished it. Then:

"Dip!" he thundered, and the fun began.

For a while he was like to have to serve out new oars from the spares that were stowed in brackets fastened to the deck-beams overhead, so excitedly the Britons worked, blade hitting blade, oar-handles bumping into backs, the Northmen yelling, and the great ship swaying in the muddied water, straining at her warp. Ten, twenty times Tros signaled, "Stop!" then started them again. It was two hours, and they were all dead weary, Conops foaming at the mouth and the Northmen growing gloomy with despair, before the rowers had the hang of it and could pull ten strokes without a dozen of them "catching crabs."

Then Orwic came, pop-eyed from too much food and drink, seated between Fflur and Caswallon in the state barge, dressed in all his finery of cloth-of-gold and jewelry, with half-a-dozen boxes full of changes of apparel and sufficient assorted weapons to have armed a company of infantry. With him he brought four fair-haired gentlemen-at-arms, as heavy as himself from too much feasting, looking scared, as if they had made their wills and testaments, not hoping to see home again.

Fflur's eyes were wet with tears. She came up first on to the poop and kissed Tros three times, hugging him.

"Lord Tros, we love you because you have loved us, and we feel we have done too little to befriend you in return."

Caswallon laughed to hide the quaver in his voice and clapped Tros hard between the shoulder-blades.

"You take my good friend Orwic! Will you leave me my enemy, Rhys, in exchange? I sent my archers with that steward to add their own impatience to his zeal. A galloper brings news they are already on the road home with the chariots and the tribute money, driving the cattle in front of them. So loose Rhys. Tros, Tros, look at the sun on the water! Lud laughs to have your great ship on his bosom!"

They all leaned overside to see the ship's reflection, silver and vermilion.

"Rhys's men?" Caswallon asked.

"I have them, all safe under the hatches, except three whose skulls lacked thickness. I will set them ashore when I am out of Rhys's reach. Not, that is, until I see the last of Britain."

"The last? Nay, nay, Tros. You will come back," Caswallon answered with an air of prophecy.

Fflur shook her head.

"I fear we see the last of Orwic, too," she said, eyes wet with tears again.

"Not so!" Tros answered. "I spoke carelessly. This first voyage I make in search of men. If I fail, I will return up-Thames to coax a British crew from you before I sail for Rome. So you must watch Rhys!"

"You will not fail," Fflur said confidently.

"If I fail not, it would grieve me not to have my friends rejoice," Tros answered. "If I win those Spaniards, let us have a feast aboard my ship."

"Where?"

"Vectis. I will anchor in the lee of Vectis.* Set a watch for me. Whichever way the wind blows, I will anchor on the island's leeward side."

"That is not my country, and Lud knows I hate the sea, but Fflur and I will come to meet you in a ship from Hythe—which is not in my country either, but they pay me tribute. That is a promise. Let us go now. I hate partings," said Caswallon.

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* The Isle of Wight.

So Tros had Rhys brought up from the water-cask and bade Sigurdsen return his sword and dagger to him. Rhys went ashore with Caswallon and Fflur in the barge, and Tros grinned as he watched him, looking down his long nose at Caswallon's great white fist that shook to emphasize a torrent of expletive threats.

But it was not the last Tros heard of Rhys. The while he trained the rowers with the ship at anchor, waiting for the tide, teaching them to back oars and to swing together in response to signals, dipping and catching the weight of the ship between the crash and echo of the cymbals, there came three boats alongside from the far bank of the river. They were full of weary-looking men, and a big shock-headed Briton in the leading boat shouted that he had a message for the Lord Tros. Tros put a hand to his ear, but the man refused to shout his information to the world at large, with all those other boats drifting to and fro within range of voices. So Tros let him come aboard, but kept a Northman handy to throw him overside in case of need.

He was a well-dressed fellow—in a yellow linen smock over woolen breeches, and a big bronze buckle on his belt and a cloak of beaded deerskin. But he was soiled with travel, looked as if he had been out in the rain all night, and his leather-shod feet were smeared thickly with mud. He had a broad nose like a blackamoor's, with wide nostrils and an iron-gray moustache like a pair of diminutive horses' tails. He was excited—breathless from excitement; anxious brown eyes glittered under shaggy iron-gray brows.

"Lord Tros, I am the Lord Rhys's tenant. I am Eog, son of Louth, the blacksmith. Is it true you have the Lord Rhys prisoner?"

Tros did not answer. He waited, watching the man's face. Eog misinterpreted the silence.

"And you sail in your great ship? Then sail away with him! Drown him out there in the sea!"

The fellow glanced to right and left, fearful of being overheard, but there was only the Northman on the poop beside Tros. Orwic and his men had turned in to sleep off last night's drunkenness.

"Lord Tros, he traffics with the Romans! He has sold us to the

Romans! He has sold your ship to the Romans! He has promised to let Cæsar know by signal on the south coast when your ship sails, if he can't prevent your sailing by having you executed! He is a cruel, hard landlord. We tenants hate him. But he has the council's ear, and men say the Lord Caswallon fears him, so we don't dare appeal against him. Kill him, Lord Tros! Kill him, and earn the blessings of his tenants!"

Tros stroked his chin. "You are late, my friend. The Lord Rhys left for Lunden in the king's barge."

Eog's face fell.

"You are undone!" he remarked, shaking his shock of hair over his eyes as he nodded. "The Lord Caswallon sent his men to Maeldon in the night. They seized horses, cows, sheep, chariots, arms, money. The Lord Rhys will beggar us to reimburse himself a little, but what he can wring from us will never satisfy him. He will send to Gaul or go to Gaul. He will betray you to the Romans for a great price! He knows you sent a messenger named Skell to Pevensey, for he sent my brother's son, armed with a sword, on a skewbald stallion to overtake and slay him. We are all undone! We are all undone!"

He wrung his hands. The corners of his mouth drooped. He looked pitifully at the men in the three boats who stared at the great ship as if salvation lay in her.

"Who are they?" Tros asked.

"Tenants and free laborers. Lord Tros, we are all liable for penalties for having left our holdings without leave. We have no right to leave our boundaries except on market days. The Lord Rhys will impose fines that will keep us beggared forever!"

Tros summoned Orwic, who came sleepily, not pleased to have been routed out of his snug cabin.

"Lud love a fellow, Tros! What ails you? Still at anchor?" His displeasure increased as he recognized Eog. "Dog!" he remarked. "I'll wager not a tenant of my own keeps bounds this minute! What do you mean, sirrah, by gadding when your master's back is turned? Are there no fields to till? No cows to milk? No clearing to be done? No fences to repair? Lud's blood! If I were the Lord Rhys I would deprive you of your holding!"

"He will! He will!" said Eog gloomily. "Already he takes two-thirds—two foals, two calves, two lambs, two pigs out of every three, two bushels out of three of all the wheat, two months' labor out of three to plow his fields and mend his fences. Now he has been fined, and he will wring the fine from us."

"Lud pity you!" said Orwic. "But you were born the Lord Rhys's men. I couldn't help you, even if my head weren't splitting so I can't think!"

"Lord Tros, we are not sailors," Eog said, watching Tros's face. It was plain enough what he intended.

"Where are your women and children?" Tros asked pointedly.

"They are as good as slaves now," said Eog. "They will be slaves if we leave them, and the better off!"

Tros shook his head.

"I have some thirty of the Lord Rhys's men aboard my ship this minute," he said, stroking his chin. "If I should add you and your companions, the Lord Rhys could indict me as a thief. Nay, nay."

"Lord Tros," said Eog, but Tros interrupted him.

"What say you, Orwic? Can a man take freemen in his service if he finds them wandering outside the jurisdiction of their king?"

Orwic snorted with disgust.

"They forfeit property and holdings if they leave the land," he answered. "They are free then to serve any one they will, but who would employ runaways?"

Tros went into his stateroom underneath the poop and filled a leather purse with minted copper coin, tossing it hand to hand while he debated with himself. Presently he returned to the poop and gave the purse to Eog.

"For your services," he said. "Three or four days, maybe a week from now I will drop anchor near the coast of Vectis. If any one should bring me information of the Lord Rhys's movements, he would find me inclined to be generous. But mind you, no women and children! Leave them on the farms. And if the Lord Rhys's luck is running half as lamely as I guess it is, you might—who knows?—be pleased to return to your wives and your children and your holdings. Eog, son of Louth, the gods are sometimes slow, but if a man has patience, they reward him in the end exactly on his merits. Remember, on whichever side of Vectis happens to be sheltered from the wind! Not later than a week from now!"

And Eog, grinning, wondering, went overside.

CHAPTER LX

MAKE SAIL!

I have listened to much talk of living. A man lives at rare moments, and the rest is hope or dread. Too many moments of life, and these carcasses in which we house our ignorance would burn up. I have seen men thrive on vice, and grow old in drudgery. But life burns. It is consummation. I have lived thrice: once in a woman's arms, once when I launched my ship, once when I took my ship's helm and let her fill away. Three more such moments might add me to the number of the gods, but for that my time is not yet.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

That afternoon, on top of the flowing tide, Tros let the *Liafail* drift downriver, cymbals and drums beating a slow measure that the oars might dip sufficiently for steerage way and no more. There were narrow channels between hidden mud-banks, and the *Liafail* had a deeper draft than any vessel that had ever sailed out of the Thames or into it.

Hardly a longshoreman saw the start. Tros, not wanting a crowd of boats around him, had let it be supposed he would remain at anchor until the next day. No villages were visible. Like Lunden Town itself, those were well hidden from the frequent raiders by dense screens of forest that descended to the swampy margin at the edge of tide water. But here and there were clearings, fish traps and the smoke of homesteads rising half a mile away behind the trees. Whenever they passed such places, crowds came down to the river's edge to watch.

Tros knew the ship looked magnificent, even though the oars moved raggedly. Vermilion top-sides, with a gold-leaf, undulating serpent above where the polished tin began, and the vermilion oar-blades—all were reflected in the water. The three great curved spars were as graceful as swallows' wings; and from the poop he could see the long bronze serpent's tongue that shot forth this and that way, quivering to every motion of the ship.

He knew, too, that there could hardly be a man in Britain who had not heard rumors, at least, of the great ship's building. Judging by the crowd that had come to stare at the ship on the ways—to laugh, sell, steal, obstruct and volunteer the information that a ship with metal on her undersides would never float, he had supposed the spectacle was too familiar in that corner of Britain to cause more than passing comment. He began to receive new education in the workings of the human mind.

At one point where the river curved so sharply around a mud shoal that he had hard work to find and keep the channel, two or three hundred men put out in small boats armed with tridents, spears and all the paraphernalia they used for despatching stranded whales. Whether it was the gold on the figurehead and the long serpent that they coveted or whether the sheer beauty and the hugeness of the ship aroused their prejudice against all novelty, he never knew. They quailed before they came within their own short arrow range, and he supposed it was the crash of the drums and cymbals, as he called for more speed, and the flickering serpent's tongue that frightened them. At any rate, he left them easily astern.

But at another place, down-river, where the tide flowed swiftly between shoal and shore—the place where, in the bireme won from Cæsar, he had caught a Northman longship beam-on and had rammed her to destruction—there was evidence of well-laid plans to wreck the *Liafail* before she could leave the Thames. They had felled great trees and staked them across the narrow channel, leaving a gap through which the tide poured at such an angle as to force any passing ship on to the longshore mud.

He backed oars and dropped two anchors over-stern. A shower of arrows hummed into the planking of the upper deck. He ordered the port-bow catapult into action, lighted the fuse on a leaden stinkball and sent it crashing into the trees, where it failed to explode but set the woods on fire. It burned with a stench that drifted on the light wind riverward and nearly threw the port-side oarsmen into panic.

One stinkball was plenty; that and the crash and the hum of the catapult with the responding flash and shudder of the serpent's tongue, so that it looked as if the serpent might have spat the burning stench forth. There was no more arrow fire. No longshore Briton showed himself. Orwic was for landing with the Northmen and imposing penalties for evil manners.

"I know their villages. I will burn them and flog their headmen." He pulled on his little peaked steel helmet.

But Tros, remembering the Lord Rhys, chose discretion. Delay might bring surprises long prepared by Rhys who—if it was he who had planned to wreck the ship—would certainly have let fall hints enough to turn out all the countryside in readiness to loot and kill. A wrecked ship was in theory the lawful profit of the king, who owned all river rights, including stranded whale and sturgeon, but in practice it was first come, first served, and the wrecker's trade was plied without distinction between friend and foe.

Tros lowered boats and sent two dozen Northmen overside to clear the passage under the protection of his catapults and arrow-engines, and it was nearly dark before Sigurdsen reported all clear and the logs adrift. By that time the tide was beginning to change and it was risky work to navigate uncharted, only half-remembered channels in the gloaming. Tros dropped half a mile or so downstream and, when he found deep water under him where the river began perceptibly to widen into estuary, he dropped anchor for the night, conscious, however, that as night fell he would lose all the advantage against river pirates that the awe-inspiring serpent and the long range of his catapults provided.

One precaution that he took was to bend two warps to the big bronze anchor that he let go from the bow. One warp took up the strain, the other lay slack, sinking below water. Leaving Sigurdsen and Orwic on the poop, he himself took the anchor watch and lay down to sleep with the slackened warp under his neck, and with the port bow engine aimed so as to discharge twelve arrows straight along the warp at the first touch of the trigger.

Before long Conops awakened him, reporting oar strokes in the dark. There was no moon yet; it was impossible to see as far as twenty feet beyond the ship's bow. All was quiet on the poop where Sigurdsen was droning Baltic tunes to Orwic. The deck watch, ten men, paced to and fro like shadows, bare feet falling silently; there were no sounds except the tinkle and suck of the water alongside, the slight squeak of the spars and one other, hardly audible, that might be swish and drip from where the anchor warp met water.

"Shoot!" urged Conops.

But Tros was thrifty; he did not care to loose twelve irrecoverable bronze-tipped arrows without knowing where the target lay. Squanderer of gold-leaf and vermilion on the ship, reckless of the price of tin and royally extravagant of linen sails and cordage, it had irked him sadly to have to use one stinkball more or less at random. To have loosed twelve arrows without due reflection were a sin. He waited, listening—too long.

The loose warp tautened suddenly and hummed. The tight warp slackened, cut through close to the waterline. He pulled the trigger then. The quarreling arrows whined into the dark and two or three of them hit woodwork. Then a man screamed, like a wounded horse—frightful, sudden—an unhuman sound. A torch shone for a moment somewhere over on the riverbank. Then rain that drowned the rising moon and drummed on deck, blotting out all other noises.

Tros did not dare to sound the alarm unless, or until, he had work at the oars for the slaves to do. They were unarmed men, as liable to panic in the darkness as so many sheep. Nor did he dare to get up anchor before sunrise except as an absolutely last recourse.

"Turn out all the Northmen!" he commanded. "Station them along the bulwarks. Go you below, and if the slaves wake, keep them seated on the benches. You may have the two oar captains to help you. Run!"

Conops vanished and Tros, ears strained, caught the sound of approaching oars. Impatiently, biting his nails, he waited for the Northmen to turn out, and as one of them, ax in hand, came leaning into the rain to take his stand below the break of the bow, he sent him below in a hurry to the magazine to bring up one of the leaden stinkballs. By the time a fire-pot had been brought too, and the oil-soaked fuse inserted, there was no more doubt as to what was coming toward them on the rising tide. The longshore Britons had a barge all fenced about with wickerwork; he could hear the squeaking of the withes as well as the splash of at least a dozen oars.

So he lighted the fuse and held the leaden ball in both hands overhead.

"Man arrow-engines!" he commanded, and the Northman ran to pass along the order.

It took time to get the covers off the carefully housed engines; time for the fuse to burn down to the neck of the infernal thing Tros held in both hands. He had time to wonder what rash idiocy Orwic would commit when a general alarm should split the night, and time to curse himself for having started on a voyage without assigning battle quarters to each Northman and inventing a system of signals by which to control all hands in darkness and emergency.

At last, before he thought the enemy was near enough, he had to fling the stinkball, lest it burst and kill him, aiming at the sound of oars and leaning overside into the rain watching the curved course of the spluttering fuse, shuddering then as a dozen arrows plunked into the woodwork all around him. But there was no splash. He heard the leaden weight fall hard, and instantly there was a burst of flame that threw a whole barge full of Britons into view, crowded so tightly together behind a screen of willow withes that they could hardly move.

They yelled and a volley of arrows screamed through the great ship's rigging, but the stinkball functioned perfectly without exploding. They could not go near it to throw it overboard; the heat melted the lead casing; the blazing chemical spread, setting fire to the barge, and in the reflected flare from that, the golden serpent's head stood forth—an apparition in the night!

Twenty, thirty hastily lighted torches came whirling through the rain on to the *Liafail's* deck, along with lumps of burning fiber, soaked in pitch and tallow, but the rain extinguished those. A terror-stricken Briton yelled that the serpent was moving toward them; and the barge, emitting clouds of yellow, green and crimson smoke, become a perfect target for the arrow-engines.

Volley after volley screamed into the holocaust until Tros blew his whistle shrilly to stop the waste of arrows; blew it to small purpose because Orwic on the high poop kept on shooting as fast as he could lay the arrows in the grooves and crank the great yew bow.

The men on the barge were jumping overboard; the barge was drifting up-stream with the tide; there was no more danger from that source and the light from it, mirrored in pools in the river, showed dozens of smaller boats flitting away like phantoms. There was, strangely, little shouting; now and then a swimmer cried to the nearest boat for help, and some one in the distance, who appeared to be controlling the attack, bellowed through a tube of some kind.

"In again! It is only a wooden serpent! Attack from all sides! Cut the cable!"

It was a hollow, haunting voice.

Tros went to the poop, pausing as he passed to rebuke each Northman for an arrow wasted.

He shoved Orwic away from the poop arrow-engine and bade Glendwyr cover it again.

"Great sport!" said Orwic, shaking the rain off the rim of his peaked helmet.

"Sport!" Tros came near to exploding with disgust. "Sport in killing poor fools who obey a rascal? Catch me that bellowing knave who cries the pack on, but keeps himself out of harm's reach! To work now! To a man's task! Sigurdsen! Lower a boat. Take axes, eight of your own men, Orwic, and his four. Bring me back that bellower alive!"

The boat went overside and Tros patrolled the deck, ears strained for warning of another attempt to creep down on him in darkness. He could hear the voices of Conops and two Northmen threatening a thrashing to the slave who should dare to leave his oar bench, and he heard the oar-blades rattle against the ports in readiness to be pushed out the full distance, so he knew he could get instant headway against the tide if the enemy should cut that second warp, though it made him shudder to think of losing a bronze anchor.

But the attack had evidently failed for good. He could see the barge, away up-stream, surrounded by a swarm of boats whose occupants were picking up survivors, keeping well to windward, and attempting to steer the gutted hulk into shallow water by shoving it with long poles.

Some one in a boat near the far bank kept on bellowing, but Tros could no longer catch the words, so he supposed the boat had begun to follow the retreat. But the bellowing ceased abruptly, and he heard one long yell mixed of fear and anger. Then silence and, after a while, the steady thump and swish of oars that he knew were his Northmen returning.

He ordered the ladder let down, but Orwic cried out for a rope. Four Northmen climbed the ladder and began hauling on the rope, hand-over-hand, in great haste, as if there were a hooked fish on the end. The rope shook, and from the darkness overside Orwic's voice half-laughed a breathless warning. Suddenly a thing flopped on the deck and struggled, slipping about on the wet planks like a fish. Orwic arrived up the ladder and pounced on it, heaving it upright—a woman! He ripped off the bandage that gagged her, letting loose her wild hair that fell in heavy, rain-wet coils. She threw her head back and howled once like a wolf, then bellowed, "Help! Help! Rescue!" in the selfsame booming voice that had directed the attack.

Tros clapped a hand on her mouth, and she bit him, drawing blood. He shook the blood off, ordered Sigurdsen to take charge of the ship, and pointed to the after deckhouse—the same place where he had had his interview with Rhys. It took four of the Northmen and Orwic to hustle the woman in there, she screaming and bellowing alternately, but presently they forced her on to the bench where Rhys had sat and lashed her arms to the wall. There by the light of the whale-oil lamp Tros looked her over.

"Gwenhwyfar!" he said, coughing up one of his monosyllabic laughs. He shook blood from his hand again. His mind went back to the time when he had first set foot in Britain. Gwenhwyfar, wife of Britomaris, had made love to him, and cursed him for not responding.

"Aye!" she said, using her third voice. It was quite unlike the battle bellow she had sent across the river, or the wolf-howl. It was low and pleasing, though it shook with anger. "I am Britomaris' wife. And you are Tros, who might have been king of Britain."

Orwic whistled, grinning, wiping off blood from his handsome face where Gwenhwyfar had gouged him with her nails. Tros leaned against the table, sucking his bitten thumb and laughing silently.

"Where is Britomaris?" he inquired after a long pause.

Gwenhwyfar glared, straining at the cords to test them. She was better than good-looking, even so, all disheveled, with hate in her eyes. The great amber ornaments heaved on her breast and her thin lower lip flushed crimson where her white teeth clenched it.

"If you have not made Britomaris, who obeys you, king of Britain, how could you have foisted me to that throne?" Tros inquired. "Is the Lord Rhys the man you favor for the kingship nowadays?"

Gwenhwyfar did not answer. Orwic spoke up.

"She is always looking for a man to ditch Caswallon. Caswallon laughs. I suppose you won't kill her, either. Keep her till morning and watch her swim."

Tros ignored him.

"Gwenhwyfar, it appears to me the gods have brought you."

"Nay, nay! It was I who brought her!" Orwic laughed. "She clung by the nails to my face, or I might have lost her overside!"

"In the nick of time," Tros continued. "Either you shall tell me what you know about the Lord Rhys's plans, or you shall go to Cæsar nailed up in a box. Cæsar will keep you to walk at his chariot tail when he enters Rome in triumph. After which you will be sold at auction to the highest bidder."

Gwenhwyfar only glared, and Tros made a mistake.

"In Rome they pay extravagant prices for fair-skinned slavewomen," he said, "and Cæsar uses all expedients to fill his purse."

She did not exactly smile, nor did her eyes soften, but there passed over her a wave of pride that her price would be high. Half Britain knew her as "Caswallon's scornling." She burned for even one hour of glory. Tros read her—knew she saw herself glorious, in chains at Cæsar's triumph, then on a block at auction, haggled for by all the wealthy men of Rome.

"Nail her in the Lord Rhys's water-cask!" he ordered. There was no use arguing with a woman while she dreamed such dreams as that.

She began to mock him. She used words that made Tros set his teeth and brought the blush to Orwic's cheek. Wharf-rat language would have left them utterly indifferent, but she said things of Tros's dead wife that pierced all sense of decency, as knives cut nerves. And when the Northmen loosed her from the rings in the deckhouse wall she fought them like a she-wolf.

"She will never go to Cæsar," Orwic said, when they had carried her below. "She will sooner kill herself. Gwenhwyfar is no bird that can live in a cage."

"Has she ever been to sea?" Tros asked, and laughed.

He ordered a mattress laid on the poop, where he lay down to sleep until dawn. He knew what the morning would bring. He proposed to be ready for it.

At daybreak the tide was still making, and there was nothing to be gained by wearying the rowers. Stiff they were from yesterday's short effort, and ill-tempered because there was no milk for breakfast. They could see no sense in cleaning down a ship that still smelt of new paint, and they objected to wet benches, to the herrings and bread served out to them in wooden bowls, to the draft through the oar-ports and to being made to fold their blankets. They wanted to sit shivering with the blankets wrapped around them and, above all, they insisted they could row no more until the stiffness, that they thought was rheumatism, left their muscles.

So when the tide changed there was a little whip and a lot of swearing, before the anchor was hauled in at last and the glittering serpent's tongue began to flicker to the awkward oar-swing and the *Liafail* made headway to the sea.

Tros gave the helm to Sigurdsen and spent the first two hours inspecting blocks, sheets, halyards, stays, shrouds, and telling off the Northmen to their stations, while he conned the sky at intervals and hoped for a favoring wind. Not he nor, as far as he knew, any man had sailed a ship with three masts, and he would have liked a day or two to break the oarsmen in and get them used to ship-board before shaking down the furled sails. For he would need all his Northmen then to man the ship, and there would be none to spare to keep the slaves in order.

But he knew that presently he would have to use the sails or else anchor again, and the thought of losing time while Cæsar's Spaniards might be on the way, moved him to run all risks except such as were unseamanly.

So he set a man to splice the warp Gwenhwyfar's men had cut, told off the rest of the Northmen carefully, assigning each to the work best suited to him, went below for a while to watch Conops moving from bench to bench instructing oarsmen, then stood beside Sigurdsen at the helm to await the inevitable.

First came the wind, a steady, fresh breeze on the starboard quarter, good enough. And presently it heaped the flowing river into regular, smooth waves that swept under the ship and lifted her. Two-score oarsmen endured that for a while, then ceased to keep time. There was blasphemy below deck because others, finishing their swing, were struck in the back by the oar handles of other men who groaned and vomited. The sick men swore it was the herrings they had had for breakfast. The word poison emerged more than once through the opened hatch.

Then, nearing the bar, where the river's banks spread away into the distance and the curious, perplexing currents from the mud flats and mussel shoals went hurrying seaward, there were lumpy waves that changed the easy motion into roll and dip. Oar after oar came in then, resting with its blade just showing through the port, and the din through the open hatch was like the voice of the infernal regions where the souls of unforgiven men lament. Eleven oars still slapped the water in spasmodic jerks and Conops raised his one inquiring eye above the level of the hatch. He said nothing, but held up his whip at arm's length to draw Tros's attention.

"Cease rowing! Stow oars!"

Tros's voice held laughter that had nothing to do with the slaves' predicament. His ship at last, his wonder-ship should try her wings! It thrilled him as no fight had ever done, nor any sight of woman, nor even the thought of a finish-fight with Cæsar!

"All hands make sail!"

The words were Tros's orison to the keepers of his deep-sea destiny, a challenge of his soul to make full use of him and ship and all he had, a greeting to the lords of opportunity. It was a big, bull-throated roar, heart-whole, that shook him as they say great Jove's nod shook Olympus.

Then he took the helm from Sigurdsen, and as the bellying sails were sheeted home he felt the thrill of the contenting sweetness of the ship's response. She steered to a touch, yet steadily. With creaking cordage and a boiling wake, her serpent's tongue aflash in the golden sunlight as she plunged over the lumpy waves, she heeled to the increasing wind and raced for the open sea.

Tros laughed. He had designed her right! His dream had come true, and the seas of all the world were his to conquer and explore! He wished he had bent on the purple sails with the great vermilion dragons rampant on them for the first voyage. But thrift had prevented that. The unbleached linen glistened in the sun like gull's wings, and for an omen, as the clean, tin-covered hull gained speed and he ordered the sheets hauled closer, he beheld a golden eagle soaring overhead, that circled thrice around the ship and vanished northward, effortless, climbing and climbing the blue, windy reaches of the sky.

"I am a man! I live! I laugh!" he said, and with his fist struck Sigurdsen between the shoulder-blades.

CHAPTER LXI

A LETTER TO CÆSAR

I know but one worse fault in a commander than to doubt his own intelligence; and that is, to doubt his enemy's.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

One at a time they sorted from between decks Britons who were not so seasick as the rest and put them to the deck work, four to a Northman overseer, trying them out, rope's-ending them a time or two until they learned to jump at the word of command and haul on a sheet all together. That set a few of the Northmen free for Orwic to experiment with. Orwic's genius was battle. He devised swift ways of getting up the ammunition from the magazines and studied how to aim the catapults, allowing for the pitch and roll.

In Orwic was no thrift. He wanted to use the loaded leaden balls for practice, even brought them up on deck and would have fired away a dozen without wondering where new ones could be had. He would have used the catapults without first greasing down the blocks and slides and the ingenious bronze levers that multiplied the speed of the falling weight. But Tros had foreseen that. He had provided stones that weighed almost exactly what the leaden balls did, and he forbade the firing of a catapult three times without regreasing.

So Orwic squandered stones and grease, and for a while, to the crash of the falling weights on basketwork, the sea was spattered with wild shooting, until at last a hit was made on a floating piece of wreckage half a mile away, and the whole deck crew went frantic with delight. Tros inspected the wheels at the top of the thirty-foot up-rights, examined the whole mechanism, ordered the wooden box-work greased that guided the falling tons of lead to the basketwork below, observed that the basket cushions took up the concussion without injury, and let them use up all the stones, appointing Orwic his artillery lieutenant and instructing him to choose the steadiest marksmen from among the Northmen.

Then, after a long look at the wind and sun, he went below to where the water-casks were strapped in rows on chocks and, taking a whale-oil lantern, peered through a square hole into the end one, which had not been filled. He heard a groan.

"Have you had enough, Gwenhwyfar?" he inquired and knocked on the echoing cask with his sword-hilt. The answer was a curse, choked midway, followed by a louder groan.

"Will you go in this cask to Cæsar or will you come out now and tell me what I want to know?"

"Air!" Gwenhwyfar answered. "Air! I smother!"

Tros chuckled and struck at the cask again, bracing himself against the motion of the ship, not troubled by Gwenhwyfar's cravings. He knew that, though the fire and water torture may not wring confession from a strong-willed prisoner, the motion of the sea will do it always, given time enough. In the dark, when the world goes round and round, all secrets come up with a stomach's contents. All that is needed is patience and a pair of ears.

"You have air enough, unless you propose to speak. But on deck it is very pleasant," he remarked. "The sun shines."

He heard her vomiting. Then:

"Mercy!" she gasped and, between gulps, "Tros, pity me! Throw me overboard!"

He laughed.

"I will set you ashore if you tell me what I want to know," he answered, rapping on the cask again, for it occurred to him that probably the drumming din did not increase her comfort.

The ship was "talking," as all newly built ships must, each plank and beam complaining of the changing tension. The dark hold was a sea of noises and immeasurable motion.

Gwenhwyfar groaned.

"Are you lying?" she asked.

"Not I. Nor bargaining for lies," he answered. "Tell the truth."

He paused. Her hands clutched the edge of the square hole as she dragged herself upright.

"I will tell! Rhys promised to have Britomaris slain and to make me his own wife if I could wreck your ship. Now, let me out! Let me out!" she screamed. "I have told you."

"Tell me all," Tros answered, drumming again on the cask.

"Rhys heard Skell had gone to Pevensey. Let me—oh-h!—Tros, let me out! I can't talk here."

"You shall come out when you have told all."

She fell to the floor of the cask and groaned awhile, then presently got on her knees and spoke in great haste, as if to force out the words before her last strength failed:

"Rhys sent a man to overtake Skell, thinking I might fail to wreck you. The man was to bribe Skell to betray you to Cæsar. Unless Skell agreed, the messenger was to kill him. Oh-h! Let me out!"

She fell to the floor of the cask. Tros waited.

"Tell me every last word!"

She spoke from the cask floor, her voice booming hollow, like a ghoul's through a hole in a sepulcher.

"The messenger—oh-h! The messenger was to instruct Skell to find out where Cæsar will set a trap for you. Skell was to bring you a false message. There, that is all! Let me out!"

Tros thought a minute, drumming with his fingers on the cask, then pulled a hammer from the rack below the deck beams and knocked the cask-head loose. Then he reached in and lifted Gwenhwyfar by the arms, she groaning, and carried her up the ladder hanging limp across his shoulder. Presently he had a mattress laid on the floor of the after deckhouse and placed her on it, locking the door and stationing a Northman on guard.

"Wine!" he commanded.

A slave brought it, but he did not dare to trust a Briton in alone with her, seasick or not.

He went in and knelt beside her, lifting up her head and forcing wine between the pale lips, spilling most of it. He had had no training in the bedside arts. The spilt wine stung her eyes. A mouthful of it choked her. But the strong stuff brought the blood back to her cheeks. She cursed him.

"Gwenhwyfar," he said, "you missed greatness by the width of your ambition! I asked you last night, where is Britomaris?"

"He is nothing of yours," she retorted. But she sipped more wine and presently sat up, holding to the bench and looking scared and dizzy. Catching a glimpse of swaying sky through the deckhouse port, she gasped, lay down again and shut her eyes.

"I think Britomaris is all the husband you are ever likely to have, Gwenhwyfar," Tros said pleasantly. "None of us grow younger as the years roll on. Where is he?"

"I don't know," she answered, burying her face in the mattress.

Tros stood up and paced back and forth a time or two from wall to wall, pausing to glimpse through the after port at the poop and Sigurdsen.

"Rhys," he said pleasantly, "might slay Britomaris. He would never make you his wife. More likely he would have you slain, too, on a charge of treason, to seal your tongue. Trust me, not Rhys. I am an honest enemy. Rhys is a false friend. Tell me, where is Britomaris?"

She stared at him, her eyes red-rimmed and watery, her lower lip protruding, her hair an uncombed chestnut mass.

"Tros," she said, "I could have made a king of you!"

He answered: "Where is Britomaris?"

"Gone!" she answered. "Gone to the west of Britain to meet Cæsar's men. Rhys bribed him. Britomaris is to trick Gwenwynwyn of the Ordovici, who is a coward of no account, on whom five hundred soldiers would be wasted. Britomaris is to meet the Spaniards, to persuade their Roman officer and to lead them near to Lunden, where the Lord Rhys will join them with a thousand men and have at Caswallon."

"Not he!" Tros answered, hands behind him, throwing back his head in one of his discerning grins. "Rhys may raise a thousand men, but he will play both sides and await the outcome. He will help Caswallon if he thinks Caswallon wins and, after that, denounce poor Britomaris and yourself, claiming the half of your heritage for his reward! If he thinks Caswallon loses, he will join the Romans openly, cause Britomaris to be stabbed and presently denounce you as public enemy, because you know too much about him!"

Tros stroked his chin. There was important information he must gain yet. He pondered how to go about it without letting Gwenhwyfar know she had a trump remaining in her hand.

"Gwenhwyfar," he said presently, "we were friends once—you, I and Britomaris. I ate your bread when I first set foot in Britain. Shame irks me that I need to see your ruin. If I can save your Britomaris, will you play him fair and be his wife and bide the laws of Britain—if I pluck him out of Rhys's net?"

She began to sob, her face between her hands, her body shaking in convulsive shudders. Tros's eyes smiled, but he was sorry for her. Surely he was sorry.

"Speak. Shall I save him?"

She could not speak. He hardly knew whether in truth she nodded or whether the sobs still shook her. He repeated the question.

"Yes! Save him, if you will. Oh, Tros—"

She turned with the swift motion of a snake and sat up suddenly to stare at him.

"If I had wrecked your ship and taken you alive last night, there would have been no more talk of Britomaris! It would have been you and I, or death for both of us!"

"As it is, we will save Britomaris," Tros commented, resuming his stride from wall to wall. He did not choose that she should see his face that minute and each time he reached the wall he turned away from her. "Where can I reach him?" he asked off-handedly.

"Dertemue," she answered, and caught her breath. She realized as well as he did that she had betrayed the secret of where Cæsar's men would land. "Tros!" she said. "Tros! There is a devil in you!"

There was self-mastery at any rate. His face betrayed no triumph, though now he need not trust to Skell! If Skell had accepted a bribe to lead him in the wrong direction, he could nevertheless find

Cæsar's men. Nothing to do but sail to Dertemue and await their coming!

"Tros," she said. She had detected something like a gleam behind the amber eyes. "You will betray me? You will betray Britomaris?"

He made one of those strong, slow, confidence-imposing gestures that revealed his character more certainly than words.

"Never," he answered.

Another thought occurred to him, a blind guess snatched at random as the panorama of the past week's happenings passed swiftly across his mind.

"If you had wrecked me, would you have sent word to Cæsar?"

"Yes," she answered. "Rhys would have demanded your head to send to Cæsar. Lud! But what would Rhys have been to me if I had won you! I would have told Rhys you were drowned. I would have given him your cloak, full of arrow holes, to send to Cæsar, bloodied up from other men's wounds. Rhys has a man in Pevensey who waits, all ready to sail to Caritia with your head in a basket."

"You would have sent the cloak instead?"

She nodded.

"Aye. I love you!"

"I have an old cloak," said Tros. "Can you write?"

Gwenhwyfar laughed. The blood began returning to her pale lips and her eyes grew brighter.

"Aye, Tros, I learned that from the druids."

"Can Rhys write? No? Then I will sign his name! Gwenhwyfar, write to Cæsar! We will pin that letter to my old cloak, bloodied up and pierced with arrow holes."

She lay back, overcome again by nausea, but she smiled at him, nevertheless.

"Tros," she said, "Tros, you could have been a king!"

He left her and bolted the door, stationing a Northman to keep watch through one of the arrow ports. Her moods were as sudden as the seas before a veering wind. She would hate him again presently.

He took the helm awhile for the sake of the feel of the ship's response to it, and two or three times he changed the course to give the Northmen practice in trimming the sails. Then, giving charge to Sigurdsen, he went to the hatch and looked down at the rowers, sprawling, vomiting between the benches; went forward to the galley where the cooks were in a like predicament; laughed and returned to his own stateroom underneath the poop, where for a while he studied his water clocks, three bowls with holes in them, that floated in leaden tanks and, slowly filling, sank, the first in four hours, the second in twelve hours and the third in twenty-four.

Presently he pulled out his third best cloak from a locker underneath the carved oak bunk and, with a wry face, because he hated to see good purple cloth destroyed—he had intended that cloak should be Conops' great reward after he himself had worn it a few more times--he tossed it into a corner. Then, cutting off a section from a roll of parchment, thoughtfully he wrote a letter, pausing before each word because, though he had great facility with Greek and Latin, he had trouble with the spelling of Gaulish words.

The motion of the ship, as he sat with elbows spread on the oaken table and his legs stretched out in front of him, made it a simple matter to disguise his handwriting. The scrawl looked as if some one half illiterate but with a good command of spoken Gaulish had done it by flickering torchlight.

To Cæsar, the Roman, in Gaul, greeting from the Lord Rhys of Maulden in the Isle of Britain, and from the Lady Gwenhwyfar, wife of the Lord Britomaris:

This according to our promise. The great ship built by Tros, the Samothracian, was wrecked on the bank of the Thames by our contriving. There was a great battle by night and many arrows struck Tros. He, fighting furiously, weakened, and his knees gave under him so that he fell headlong and was swallowed by the water, being seen no more. Tide bore his cloak to shore and it was found at daybreak.

Therefore, there is no more the great ship to fear nor any danger to the Spaniards whom the Lord Rhys will await at Dertemue.

We await the proof of Cæsar's word. It was three talents for the head, but it was no more seen and we have sent the cloak as surety our work is well done.

Now send three talents by a trusted hand to Pevensey, whereafter all shall be continued as agreed between us.

Tros, after reading the letter a dozen times, signed it, "Rhys of

Maulden," and left a space below that for Gwenhwyfar's signature. Then he took the cloak on deck and ordered Orwic to shoot arrows through it until it looked as if it had been through half a dozen battles.

Seasick men were butchering some equally seasick sheep for dinner on the forward deck. Tros drenched the torn cloak in the sheeps' blood, let the blood dry, then towed the cloak overside at the end of a line, with a bronze-tipped arrow caught by the barbs in the lining.

"Cæsar," he said to Orwic, "is a shrewd, lean fox, not easily deceived, but he will recognize the cloak by the gold braid around it, concerning the meaning of which he questioned me when I was his prisoner in Gaul. Now if Skell should have betrayed me and should be offering to lead me into Cæsar's trap, Cæsar may think I was slain since Skell left Britain, in which case he may send Skell to Pevensey with a message that the Spaniards are on their way. So we will go to Pevensey with all haste, but we will not wait there long.

"And it may be that Cæsar will see through this trick. That nose of his can smell a rat through solid masonry. And it may be that Gwenhwyfar will yet betray me. But a wise man, Orwic, uses all expedients and overlooks no opportunity that the gods have thrust into his hands."

CHAPTER LXII

DISCIPLINE

Show me successful mutiny, and I will show you a commander who believed his men were as humorless and stupid as himself.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Tros had trouble with his top-masts. They were too tall. When he ordered topsails set that afternoon to take advantage of a steady breeze, there was too much leverage aloft for the ship's beam and depth. She steered unhandily, needing two strong men on the steering oar. And when the breeze freshened two top-masts snapped before the Northmen could get sail off or the men at the helm could bring the ship around into the wind.

So Sigurdsen said, "I told you so," which made Tros lose his temper, and there was other trouble besides. For instance, Orwic lost his head completely. The slaves below deck heard the sharp reports of breaking spars and, seasick though they were, began to storm up the hatch in panic that was increased by the changed ship's motion as the men at the helm hove her to. Orwic leaped to the hatch and defended it, drawing his sword, instead of letting the slaves surge through and find out for themselves that nothing serious had happened.

It would have been easy enough, on deck, to have laughed them out of their alarm and that lesson might have done good. But Orwic wounded three men seriously, driving the rest below and clapping on the hatch cover. The slaves made up their minds they were being herded to their death, and there was a riot among the oar benches that called for all Tros's mastery. They began to throw the oars out through the ports, there being not much other mischief they could do, until one bright genius suggested they could break the deck loose from the beams and force an opening to freedom.

So the oars that were not yet thrown out through the ports were turned into battering rams, and a pounding began on the deck that shook the whole ship. Whip was no use. Conops and the Northmen oar captains hurled themselves into the confusion, flailing right and left, but oar ends made good weapons, and they were driven backward to the ladder where Tros opened the hatch in the nick of time and rescued them, bruised and bleeding.

"Stink! Throw the stink into them!" urged Conops.

But Tros wanted oarsmen, not corpses.

"Open all hatches!" he thundered. "Sigurdsen! Below there with a dozen men, and drive the fools on deck!"

The Northmen plunged into the opening with capstan bars. The thundering ceased on the deck planking and the Britons began pouring out on deck, where they stormed the two boats, unlashing them from the rings that held them down on the oaken chocks, starting to drag them toward the davits.

Tros, swallowing impatience, stood and showed them how to launch the boats, which, crowded full, were large enough to hold between them about forty men. They got in one another's way—as mad as steers, too mad to know whose voice advised. Tros signaled to the Northmen, who came up red-faced through the forward hatch; they charged down deck and broke the crowd up into two detachments, leaving a dozen or two frantically laboring at the boats. Once on the run the Northmen kept the Britons moving, driving them around the deck and herding them up forward. The remainder lowered both boats and swarmed into them, hand-over-hand down the falls. They had no oars. They had forgotten that. Tros ordered the falls hauled up and two short oars thrown down to each boat.

"Now stay adrift!" he roared. They had neither food nor water, and began to realize it. "Not a slave returns until you have picked up all the oars you fools threw overboard!"

They were out of sight of shore. Above them the great ship tossed, two top-masts swinging by the stays, the loose sails thundering, the serpent's tongue flashing to right and left. But at last a man in the stern of the rowboat cried:

"Brothers! See the color of the water! That way lies the river! Row for it! We will pick up long oars as we go!"

"Man the port stern catapult!" Tros thundered. His voice roared clear above the thunder of the sails.

Four Northmen ran and cranked the weight aloft, and every slave in both the boats had seen what the catapults could do.

"Go and find those oars! Look lively now!"

Two short oars to a boat, they began to paddle timidly, afraid of the short waves that pitched and rolled them, more afraid of Tros and his artillery. Tros sent a Northman up to the masthead to shout directions to them, then went forward.

"Get aloft and bring those top-masts down on deck," he ordered. "Leave these fools to me!"

The Northmen swarmed aloft, and Tros stood looking at the Britons herded on the bow and on the deck below the bow. A few had armed themselves with odds and ends—belaying pins, capstan bars, wood from the cookhouse fuel box. They looked ugly enough, but the panic had left them. Some were still miserably seasick; three were wounded; nearly all had bruises, because the Northmen had used capstan bars to keep them moving. Orwic, and with him Glendwyr, came and stood behind Tros.

"Are ye ashamed?" Tros asked. He stood there hands on hips, his back against the foremast, looking like a man who knew his own mind perfectly, whereas he was not at all sure how to handle them. "Six of you, carry those three wounded fools aft!" he commanded.

They obeyed. A dozen made haste to obey, all too glad of a chance to get out of the storm that was coming. Tros had to herd back six of them.

"They're beaten!" Orwic whispered. "Better thrash them one by one!"

"Is that the way you school a horse?" Tros snorted, turning on him, showing fifty times more anger than he felt. Once more the gods had given him the proper cue! "Fool!" he thundered. "These are scarelings. Shall I make them more afraid? Learn to keep that sword in the sheath until it's needed!"

Orwic chewed at his moustache and tried to look like a gentleman who had not received rebuke.

"Below there! To your benches! Mark this—any more such foolishness and I'll chain you to the seats!"

At a jerk of his thumb the nearest men filed past him to the hatch. The others followed them like sheep, dropping their belaying pins and capstan bars quickly before he should see them. Tros stood conning them, his face a strong enigma. He was making sure that none had been too badly damaged by the Northmen's blows, but he did not let them guess what thought was in his mind. When the last of them had vanished through the hatch he turned to Glendwyr.

"Go below with them," he ordered. "Talk to them. Get them good-humored again. Let them know they are fortunate not to be slaves of a weak and revengeful master. Give them tallow for their bruises. Tell them that any other man than I would hang each tenth fool from the yardarm as example to the rest. Be mother and uncle to them for a while. Then, when they've come to their senses promise them to try to coax me to let them have mead for their supper. Go!"

Then he turned on Orwic and read riot law, first principles for making panic-stricken scarelings into men:

"Stab, hang, beat. They learn you are afraid of them! You hothead with your ready sword and dagger! Any fool can stab! That's first instinct. Do you dam the river flood, or do you clear a course for it? Do you stand in the way of a bolted horse? Or do you run alongside of him and get the rein and pull him around in circles until he tires of it? Lud's anguish! I have seen you break a team of horses and not use the whip once. Remember this—a man has more brains than a horse. Out-think him, if you hope to keep control! And take good care that when he thinks, he'll have an unexpected clemency to think about, but never a glimpse of weakness. Justice first, strength always! There is neither strength nor justice in a sword stab at a poor fool afraid for his life."

"I regret what I did," Orwic answered, saluting him.

"Go and bury regret and don't do it again!" Tros retorted and turned away from him to watch the Northmen passing down the top-masts to the deck. Not for another five-and-twenty men would he have let Orwic see how satisfied he was. He knew he had accomplished more to discipline his crew than a whole month's uneventful voyage could have brought about. The twenty who were quartering the sea for lost oars would have a long look at the great ship on the water and would return with their minds full of it, to talk about it to the others, beginning to think of the ship with pride instead of as a prison.

But better than that was discovery how well the ship behaved when hove to. He had left the youngest of the Northmen at the helm, a youth not likely to have used much head work if the ship had fallen off the wind and filled away. But all the time that riot lasted and the Northmen labored up aloft to clear away the broken top-masts, the great serpent's head had curtseyed to the wind, swinging a little this way and then that, but never enough to fill the sails or make the helmsman work. She was a good dry ship, too. Not a gallon of solid water had come overside, although the waves were chopping up before a brisk wind crosswise of the tide. She was a steady ship and weatherly. He judged she had worked to windward just about enough to offset drift.

So when Sigurdsen came down on deck along with the main topmast, grumbling, with a great deal more about his "told you so" and, stopping to secure the broken spar to the bulwark stanchions, talked back at Tros between his legs, his gloom proved uncontagious.

"Too much newness! Too much untried crazy stuff!" said Sigurdsen. "You should have listened to me. We laughed at a man on the Baltic who tried new rigs, and we called his wife widow before ever he put to sea. You will lose this ship yet!"

"Aye! Over the edge of the world!" Tros answered, laughing. "A square world and a Baltic lugger! Rig new top-masts, shorter by two cubits and stayed aft as well as forward."

"This having three masts is madness!" Sigurdsen went on.

But Tros, with the course in mind, knew fairly well how fast the ship had sailed and, well contented that the damage was no greater, squared his shoulders and went aft to bandage up the wounds of the oarsmen whom Orwic had stabbed. That was a messy business that his heart did not delight in, but the druids had given him pungent stuff that smelt like tar for treating wounds and he attended to the bandaging himself because he could not afford to lose three oarsmen.

That done, he watched the boats come back with the recovered oars, observing that the crews had learned one lesson. They no longer feared the motion of the waves nor troubled when a wave-top lipped over the bow and drenched them. Three or four were bailing leisurely, and some were singing. They reported they had picked up all the oars, and came aboard hand-over-hand up a rope with their feet against the ship's side, almost with the air of sailors, but not quite.

"Salute the poop, you dogs!" Tros roared. "You grinning wharf rats! Do you think my ship is a longshore stews that you can swagger into and pay down your money for a drink?"

He made them stand there and salute him ten times running, just to train their memories. Then twice he made them lower away the boats again and haul them up evenly, snatching at the halyards on the run and swinging in the davits handsomely. They went below all grinning at their new-found sea legs, but Tros stopped the man who had cried from the stern of the boat to the others about the color of the water and direction of the land. He gave him a red cord to hang around his neck.

"I appoint you first oarsman on the starboard side," he said.

The fellow grinned, saluted and departed down the hatch. He had expected to be punished. Orwic stared, then exploded—

"You reward him?"

"No. I recognize him. There are seeds of leadership in that man." He turned to the helmsman. "Let her fall off—easy now! This is a ship—not a four-horse chariot!"

The Northmen managed the sheets and braces without a word from Tros, keeping their eyes on him, obeying gestured signals. For a while Tros watched the course, considering the wind, tide, current, then left Sigurdsen in charge and went back to the deck-house where Gwenhwyfar lay. He found her lying with her face still buried in the mattress, looking like a drowned thing with her hair all matted. But she stirred as he entered.

Tros leaned against the table, fingers rapping his sword-hilt.

"Death, Gwenhwyfar, comes to all of us when we have played our part," he said. "The men who know about such things have told me there is a long rest after that and utter happiness before we come again into the world and finish what we left undone. I will start my next life without this one's rotten ropes to splice!"

She raised her head and stared.

"What would you have me do?" she asked. "You talk like Fflur. You act like destiny! I tremble when you speak. I hate you! What would you have me do?"

"Act nobly!" Tros retorted. "All of us make errors. Make them bravely, bear the blame and eat the consequences. I will set you free in Pevensey. I have a letter and a cloak, shot full of arrow holes. Take both. Send them to Cæsar or try once more to break me under the wheels of your revenge."

She sat up, elbows on her knees, head resting on her hands, her chestnut hair a cloud around her shoulders. But between her brown fingers her eyes were watching him.

"You ask me to do you a favor?" she said at last.

"Nay, save yourself, Britomaris and all Britain. So you and I will square our reckoning and hold no grudge between us when we come to earth another time."

"I like now better than another time," she answered. "Tros, you are too strong. Have you any notion how a scornling feels?"

"Aye. Once or twice I have despised myself," Tros answered. "But I took care never to repeat the lesson. That is why I will set you free in Pevensey without conditions. I will not have your treachery for which to blame myself. You may be friend or enemy."

"If I say friend, will you trust me?"

He nodded.

"And if you say enemy, I will set you free nevertheless."

"Are you a very wise man or a fool?" she asked. "I know not in my own mind."

"I speak you fair, Gwenhwyfar."

"And you bid me send a written lie to Cæsar!"

Her lips curled, not exactly scornfully but with a hint of malice. She believed she had him on the quick.

"Lie to Cæsar or betray me and let Cæsar's army land in Britain!" he retorted. "Choose the lesser of two evils or the greater. Even as I choose between a fight with Cæsar and the chance to run away. I will play the man. Play you the woman."

"Tros," she said, "there is no gainsaying you! Very well, I will send your cloak to Cæsar."

She lay down again, burying her face between her hands and breathing hard.

Tros walked out, fastening the door behind him.

CHAPTER LXIII

GWENHWYFAR YIELDS

I have heard that a woman scorned is a worse danger than a fire on a ship at sea. But why scorn her? It is not by scorning fire and tempest that a captain brings a ship home. Though I buy not, need I scorn the would-be seller? Nay, if I show him a better market I may even earn his good-will. It is so with women.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

There was many a delay before they sighted Pevensey, and Tros dropped anchor in the lee of the long sand-flat that arose, with coarse grass shaking in the wind, between the harbor and the sea. There was a split sail with a patch on it, due to a Northman's carelessness while Tros slept. A chafed throat-halyard had parted and a falling spar had smashed the cookhouse roof. Deck water-casks had gone adrift in a three-reef gale, and there was a great gap in the bulwark where a rolling cask had broken through.

But the face of Helma on the figurehead still smiled and the long, forked serpent's tongue flashed handsomely to every motion of the ship. There was an eye-appealing smartness in the way the sails were clewed up to the spars; and when the oars came out to work up to the anchorage against the tide, they swung together as if a hundred-handed Hercules were prisoned under deck. There was no sound of the whip, no swearing, nothing but the clang of cymbals and the drum-thud as they dipped, vermilion in emerald and white, and swung, Tros with his baton marking time, beside the helmsman on the poop.

He did not choose to enter the port of Pevensey, and there were many reasons. First, the shifting sand banks with a tortuous course between them where a ship could take the sand bow-on before the lead came up. Second, it was late spring. Cæsar's biremes might be cruising in the Channel. Tros wanted sea-room. Given that, he feared no dozen biremes.

Then, again, he did not care to take his crew into a British port yet. They were too near home. It was a first rule of ship's husbandry to give the crew shore leave as often as convenient to save them from salt water boils, the scurvy, cramp and the depression born of oar monotony. But it was also a rule in any seaport to take a toll of all ships' crews, decoying them to hiding places, where they could be caught and reënslaved in due time, when the ship had sailed away without them. In a foreign port a man dared land his crew, because even a drunken oarsman reasonably treated on his own ship would hardly trust the promises of longshore tavern keepers. But near a home port, where the tavern keepers spoke their language, slaves were safest with a tide-rip hurrying between them and the land.

There was a risk, too, that if he entered Pevensey, some fishing boat might sneak out of the harbor mouth, conceivably by night, and carry word to Cæsar that the great ship was afloat and cruising between Gaul and Britain. That would end all prospect of the Spaniards' sailing until Cæsar could send a fleet out to destroy the monster ship, of which so many rumors must have reached him. Whereas, at anchor, there in the very jaws of the long harbor entrance, although out of sight of Pevensey itself because the coastwise towns of Britain were well hidden from the all too frequent raiders, Tros could see who came and went. Provided the watch were wakeful, even in the night no fishing boat could pass to sea without his leave.

Last, given a fair wind—and at that season of the year the wind would suit them three days out of seven—the Spaniards could pass from Gaul to Britain at almost any point along the coast between dawn and dawn. If he should hear of them, he would want to waste no time nail-biting at the tide or feeling his way foot by foot to sea, in darkness, between sand banks.

He had decided he would trust Gwenhwyfar, against Orwic's firm conviction she would play him false. It was against reason and he knew it. But he had the trick of intuition and had learned, by long experience, that reason is a rut-bedraggled hag, while intuition is a goddess who can see inside the houses, into men's hearts and beyond the hills and trees. Reason reckons yesterdays, but intuition tells about to-morrow.

So the Northmen went to work repairing damage, and the Britons cleaned ship, sanding down the decks, while Tros, with a look-out at all three mastheads, interviewed Gwenhwyfar for the last time. She was smiling and well-pleased with him because he gave her money liberally for the journey home; but he knew no wind changed swifter than her moods, and he was minded, if he could, to say a parting word that should stick barbed into her memory.

"If you can learn in this life to play fair, and to choose between friend and enemy, you might be a queen in the next life," he said, fixing her with his lion's eyes. He looked like a priest of Isis when he stood that way, still and smooth-browed, with the black hair straight over his forehead.

She did not answer. She stood waiting. British manners offered no alternative, so Tros embraced her, kissing both cheeks. She flung her arms around his neck then and caught her breath, sobbing, laughing, whispering in his ear:

"I have lost you, Tros, but only this time! I will help you against Cæsar, and next time—"

A half sob choked her speech. She thrust herself away from him, wet-eyed, and she looked older than Tros by ten years, but there was a bravery of youth within her still and something not contemptible in line and gesture.

"Like gods, we live forever," Tros answered. "Do what is right, Gwenhwyfar."

That came as close to a blessing as he ever gave to any one in words, for sentimental mouthings nauseated him. He did not know why he should pity and like Gwenhwyfar. He knew he did, as surely as he knew she could never make him captive of her charms.

He sent Orwic ashore with her in the longboat with eight Northmen and ordered up the slaves to line the rail by way of farewell compliment. But as he saw her rowed away, and in his heart knew she would not betray him but would spare no pains to ruin all her friends this once for sake of him, he wondered whether the gods themselves, in all their infinite and condescending irony, would stoop to use such means.

He blew a great sigh, like a grampus coming up to breathe.

"Well, I am not a god," he muttered, "and I think I have hurt her less than she was willing to hurt me."

CHAPTER LXIV

NEWS!

A good plan is as easy to get as a chestnut from the embers. For one bad one there are ten good. But find me a man who can splice a broken plan and of its two parts build a new one in the crack of a sail's splitting. I will make him free of my quarter-deck.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Before the next dawn following the afternoon when Tros dropped anchor off Pevensey, there were five small sailing boats made fast to the stern of the *Liafail*. Of the five, the first two had essayed to slip past by daylight, keeping to the shallow water on the far side of the channel. But one of the first things Tros had done was to take on a new deckload of flat stones, and to put Orwic to work at the catapult.

Within an hour the catapult crew had all the marks within reach so well ranged that they actually hit one flat stone with another on the edge of the sandy beach. So when two boats sailed by, ignoring signals, one had the mast knocked out of her and the second put her helm up promptly, coming alongside, scandalized, to plead such innocence as only fishermen are guilty of, and none but madmen could believe.

Neither boat carried anything that even looked suspicious, but their five-man crews denied that they knew who Cæsar was, denied that they had ever heard of him.

"Then stay here and be deaf a little longer!" was Tros's comment. He put two Northmen into each boat to guard the ends of the ropes with which he tied them to the taffrail.

By night it was not so simple, especially before the moon rose. Lapping of the waves against the ship drowned other noises. It was so dark that from the poop Tros could scarcely see the mainmast. So he showed a light and lowered both boats, filling them with Northmen, who had orders to lie close in-shore on the far side and pounce on all who tried to pass. One by one they brought in three more crews of fishermen, not one gray-bearded innocent of whom had ever heard of Cæsar. Nor did they know how many more boats there were in Pevensey, nor who was Skell the Northman, nor Gwenhwyfar. They were quite sure they never had heard of Skell—so sure of it that Tros was quite sure they were lying.

"Nevertheless, I think I, too, would lie if I were in their case," he reflected, and he lent no ear to Sigurdsen's suggestion of a rope's end, nor to Conops' talk about the virtues of a knife-point thrust between the toe nail and the quick. He fed those fishermen and waited.

And a little after dawn there came a sixth boat, rowed by two men with a third man in the stern. And that was followed by a seventh, under sail, that carried, by arrangement with Gwenhwyfar, her own red woolen shawl tied up to the masthead, streaming in the wind. So they let that sailing boat go by unchallenged and Tros, superstitious in his own way, laughed to himself to think it was the seventh.

"The sacred number—number of the gods!" he grinned, and waited for the rowboat.

From it stepped and climbed the hanging ladder to the poop, a man whose dull red beard stuck outward all around his face. He had a basket in his hand as big as those the women carried on their backs to Lunden market. He declared his name was Geraint but his beady eyes that peered over apple cheeks did not suggest that he expected Tros to believe that or anything else. He set the basket on the deck and stared at Tros and waited.

Tros poked at the basket with his toe a time or two, recalling in his mind the details of the system of communication he had settled on with Skell.

"How many eggs do you bring? When did you leave Gaul?" he asked.

"One egg," the man replied, who said his name was Geraint. "I left Gaul day before yesterday."

"One egg! Lord Zeus!"

Tros tore away the basket-lid and pulled another basket out, a third, and then a fourth inside that.

"Four warships? And sailed yesterday?"

The man grinned amiably, as if he admired the way Tros ground his jaws together.

"Too much time wasted! Too late!" Tros muttered, wrenching at the lid of the last basket. It was fastened all around with fiber and not easy to remove. Sigurdsen, Orwic, Conops and Orwic's four retainers came and watched. Tros pushed the basket toward Conops.

"Use your knife," he ordered, and Conops slid the blade under the fastenings. Tros had turned away, hands behind him, staring at the open sea, his heavily ringed fingers clenching and unclenching as he ground his teeth.

How should he get men now? The Spaniards probably had landed yesterday in Britain and would be impossible to round up. True, he might catch Cæsar's warships on the way back, defeat them and take over the survivors of their crews, but—

A sharp exclamation from Conops made him turn again and stare. His eyes blazed suddenly. In Conops' hand, raised by the hair, was a human head.

"Skell's!" said Conops.

Sigurdsen pounced on the man who had said his name was Geraint, seized his wrists and lashed them tight behind his back. The man offered no resistance.

"Torture!" said Conops, pointing with his right forefinger at the ghastly face. Orwic shuddered. Tros, his eyes changing, stared at the man whom Sigurdsen had pinioned.

"You are not Geraint," he said.

"No," the man answered. "I am Symmachus. I am a Gaul."

Tros made a gesture of disgust.

"Put that thing back in all four baskets," he commanded. "Put a stone in with it. Sink it in mid-channel."

He turned on the man who now admitted that his name was Symmachus.

"You have your courage with you," he remarked.

The man smiled amiably.

"Cæsar said you are not a cruel man," he replied. "He said, if you should slay me you would do it swiftly. And he paid me well. He gave my two sons money and as much land as two teams of oxen can plow. We had nothing. I am well content."

"Are you a fisherman?" Tros asked.

The man nodded.

"I lost my boat. My wife died of the hunger."

The man's comically amiable face, framed in the dull-red whiskers, beamed with satisfaction. He had expected at least a scourging. His story was as frankly told as if he were relating something that was no concern of his at all.

"Geraint brought Skell," he said. "Geraint sold him to the Romans, but Skell slew Geraint when he saw he was betrayed. I saw that. The Romans took me for a witness. I saw Skell brought before Cæsar. I was within six paces of him, squatting on the ground before the great tent. Cæsar said to Skell, 'I know you!' But Skell said nothing.

"For a long while Skell was silent, although Cæsar asked him many questions. I saw Skell put his hand to his mouth, but the Roman officer who stood beside him saw that too, and smote him in the jaw and, seizing him, gagged him with a sword-hilt, breaking some teeth. He pulled out a piece of parchment from his mouth and offered it to Cæsar, who smiled.

"'You are a spy,' said Cæsar. 'You stand convicted.' But Skell said nothing.

"'Torture him,' said Cæsar, 'and when he is willing to tell his story, let me know. There is no need to preserve his usefulness,' he added. 'You may put him to extremity. When we have his story we are done with him.'

"So they threw Skell to the ground not far from Cæsar's tent, and a black man came up who had a pot of charcoal. Hot irons were put to Skell's feet until he yelled so that Cæsar frowned and grew impatient, ordering that Skell be gagged, saying it was impossible to attend to important matters in the midst of so much noise. And after a long time an officer came to Cæsar, who said that Skell would now speak.

"So they carried Skell, he begging to be slain, and Cæsar, observing him shrewdly, said he would confer that favor provided the truth were told, and all the truth, without prevarication. So Skell told about the eggs he was to send you in a basket to signify when and from which port the Spanish troops were sailing. And he told about this great ship, speaking very swiftly because he wished to die soon and be free from pain. But Cæsar made him tell the story three times over. And the secretary wrote it.

"Then Cæsar, studying the tablet, made a gesture with his head and with his left thumb. So they dragged Skell away to the camp ditch at the place where the rubbish is burned, and presently they came back carrying his head.

"There was much joking after that, and laughter, Cæsar wondering whom he should send to you with that head in a basket in place of the eggs from a Spanish hen. And one said—he was a high officer. He wore a white cloak—'it will not do now to send the Spaniards.' But it happened at that moment Cæsar's eyes observed me where I still squatted in the dust outside the tent.

" 'No,' he said, 'it will not do now to send the Spaniards. Who is that man?'

"So they told him, and I was made to stand before him in the opening of the tent, he striking his teeth with the thumbnail of his right hand. Suddenly he asked me—

" 'Do you speak the Roman tongue or understand it?'

"But I pretended not to understand the question, being frightened. I began to beg of him in Gaulish, saying I am poor and have two sons but no more any fishing boat, having lost mine in the storm when I went to catch good fish for Cæsar.

"So he smiled, and when he had thought awhile he began to bargain with me, until at last I agreed to carry Skell's head to you in a basket and to take all chances that you might slay me.

"'But I think he will not,' said Cæsar; 'because Tros is afraid for his own soul and will not take human life if he can help it.'

"Then, having agreed how much money and how much land he will give my sons, he tried to catch me, asking suddenly, 'Concerning the Spaniards, what will you say when Tros asks you?' But though his words were Gaulish I pretended not to understand his meaning, being fearful he might call the bargain off if I should seem to know too much. I was anxious that my sons should have that money and the land.

"'Did you not hear what Skell told me?' he demanded.

"So I admitted I had heard that. Skell had told his tale in Gaulish. Cæsar said—

"'What then will you say to Tros about the Spaniards?'

"And I said—

"'I know nothing of them.'

"He thought a long while, chin on hand, and at last he said:

"'If I had ships to spare, I would send those Spaniards and not you. But since I can not spare ships, I will have my little joke with Tros. It makes no difference what you say about the Spaniards. Say anything you please, since they will not sail. If Tros is still alive when you reach Britain, wait for him in Pevensey and give that head to him, pretending that you bring Skell's message.'"

Tros turned his back to hide a grin. He would avenge Skell! The poor knave had done his best to play the man at last. He did not blame him for confessing under torture.

"Shall we put back to the Thames?" asked Orwic. "No use going any farther now."

"Put that man Symmachus in the Northmen's mess," Tros answered. "He has done us a good service. Orwic, bring me Rhys's men from the forepeak."

Orwic hesitated. He knew his Britons.

"If you let them ashore in Pevensey," he said, "they will find Gwenhwyfar, and the next you know, she and they will be cooking up a mischief for you. You will have to use British harbors until you get more men and—"

"I will get more men!" Tros answered grimly. "Spaniards."

"But we have just heard they are not to leave Gaul."

"Credulous horseman! Do you think Cæsar would have said they will not sail unless they will? If he had said they will sail, I might have doubted it! Bring me those fellows of Rhys's."

So presently, all blinking at the sunlight, weak-kneed from confinement, filthy from much vomiting in the darkness, Rhys's men were lined up on the deck below the poop, and Tros addressed them arrogantly, standing with his legs apart, a hand on either hip.

"I held you hostages for your master's good behavior. Since sailing, two attempts were made to wreck my ship, and for both of them the Lord Rhys was responsible. Your lives are forfeit!"

They demurred, very weak and bewildered. They said they knew nothing of Tros's terms with the Lord Rhys, and nothing of his efforts to destroy the ship. They had been locked up in a dark place where food was thrown to them, and they had all been at death's door most of the time, so that they supposed the food was poisoned.

"As hostages, your lives are forfeited to me," Tros repeated. "But I will give you one chance for your lives. Can you fight? Are you willing to man my arrow-engines against Cæsar's fleet if I give you your liberty afterward?"

They complained they were unfit to fight. They had no special quarrel against Cæsar. They were the Lord Rhys's men and needed his permission before they might offer their services elsewhere. Their bellies were all watery with sickness.

"To the oars then!" Tros commanded. "Ye shall work as slaves if ye will not fight freely! Shame on you! Your master played a treachery on me and on the Lord Caswallon. He has tried to sell his native land to Cæsar. Have ye no honesty, that ye refuse the opportunity to wipe that shame away? Such dogs as you deserve the lower oar bank!"

They replied that they were honest men, trained to use weapons not oars.

"Honest?" Tros looked them over one by one. "Orwic, take charge of them. See that they clean themselves on deck where the air can blow the stink away. Feed them. Then give them their choice between the arrow-engines or the lower oar bank. If they choose oars, chain them to the benches! Sigurdsen, man the capstan! Haul short! Conops, take those five boats that lie astern of us, set their crews ashore and break a plank from each boat's bottom.

We don't want any spy work done for Cæsar for a few days! Lars, Harald, Haarfager, masthead men aloft! Oar crews to the benches. Out oars! Ready for slow ahead to come up on the anchor! Cymbals and drums, stand by!"

Of all the certainties on earth Tros knew the surest was that Cæsar would be swift. If, as seemed proven, he was planning to throw Britain into discord by sending foreign troops to help one rival king against another, he would send them now, not wait for events to rearrange themselves. Already he had had three days to man the ships since Skell revealed to him the discovery of Gwenwynwyn's and Rhys's plot against Caswallon. He would not be likely to give Caswallon time to oppose the Spaniards' landing.

The arrow-riddled cloak and the letter describing the wreck in the Thames would be in Gaul before night, for the wind was fair and if the sailboat men knew anything about the tide they could lay a V-shaped course that would bring them to Caritia at sunset. That news should be enough to make Cæsar act in any case, supposing that the Spaniards were not already on the sea.

As he worked the ship seaward under oars, with Conops crying soundings from the chains, his brain was busy with those Spaniards, for he knew what difficulties the Romans had in that forever turbulent and plundered province. He conjectured the five hundred would be levies who had not exactly mutinied at being brought to Gaul, but who were neither loyal nor safe to be brigaded alongside other troops. All Roman troops, including the Italians themselves, were likelier than not to mutiny if given much encouragement, and it was an old game for a Roman general to transfer disaffected portions of his army to some outlying district where their behavior toward the inhabitants might lead to trouble and thus provide an excuse for an expedition, loot and easy laurels for the general himself.

"If Cæsar thinks me dead, then I will soon have a ship full of good spirited men," Tros told himself. "If those Spaniards are such firebrands that Cæsar is glad to risk them on any venture, then they're just the lads for me! Better spend time taming good men than waste it coaxing dullards. They'll quarrel with my Britons. Yes, and it'll do the Britons good."

He began to pace the poop, his eyes sweeping the horizon, then came to a stand again where all could see him.

"Done with the oars!" he roared. "Make sail! Taut on the port preventer stays! Deckhands to the sheets! Aloft there. Shake her down!"

He watched the big sails sheeted home, felt the ship heel to the wind with a white wake boiling from under her, and laughed.

"Gods, give me but the opportunity!" he prayed. "I'll use it!"

CHAPTER LXV

THE FIGHT OFF DERTEMUE

How few there are who know that victories are not won on the field but in a man's heart.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

TROS made for Dertemue with all the speed his ship could show, experimenting with the sails, putting the oars to work whenever the wind dropped to less than a strong breeze, making his men sleep by their stations, watching his three water clocks, calculating, fretting and yet letting no man see that he was worried.

He kept well away from the coast of Gaul and anchored for the night under the Isle of Vectis, partly because he feared the tide-race in the dark but also because he suspected some of Cæsar's light ships might be lurking thereabouts, and to have fought them would have taken time, with the added risk that they might escape and carry the news to Cæsar that the *Liafail* was not wrecked after all.

Nearly all next day he had to use the oars, for wind failed, but when night fell, he carried on with all sail set, considering the coastwise lights that burned not far above the level of the beach. Sigurdsen begged him to anchor.

"Wreckers!" he said. "All Britons ply that trade. They set those lights to tempt raiders on to the reefs, and now and then they catch a merchant-ship."

But Tros believed he saw a system in the lights. They were too bright, spaced at too regular intervals, and did not look innocent enough to be wreckers' decoys. They were signals. He had often seen what care the Roman navigators took, when about to cross uncharted water with a fleet of ships, to send men in advance in the liburnians to build great bonfires, near the headlands as much as possible, but in any case in a long line to guide them to their destination if the fleet should become scattered in the night. They would follow the long string of lights until there were no more of them, and know by that that they had reached their port, when they would wait until dawn should show them the harbor entrance.

He did not know how far it was to Dertemue, but he knew the length of the southern coast of Britain more or less, and he was beginning to learn to judge the ship's speed, though it was so much greater under sail than he had ever dared hope it might be that he hardly trusted to his calculations yet. Even without her topsails she would boil along with a following or a beam wind, the clean tin-coated hull reducing friction to a minimum. And she would sail faster and closer into the wind than any ship he had ever known. However, they had toiled a whole day under oars, the half of the time against the tide, so he kept well out to seaward of the long-shore lights, and doubted when he reached the last one, doubted that it really could be Dertemue.

He took a sounding, but the water was too deep, and he laughed at Sigurdsen's suggestion that they should use the oars and work in-shore in search of anchorage. Orwic agreed with Sigurdsen.

"If that is Dertemue, we should be ready to enter the river-mouth at dawn, and so catch Cæsar's Spaniards as they enter."

"They never shall enter!" said Tros. "My genius is best at sea. Cæsar's on land. I wait here."

So he shortened sail and hove to; but he did not wait long before the masthead lookout cried that he heard cordage creaking in the dark. Great banks of clouds obscured the moon and there was wind enough to fill the rigging with the sea-wail that deadens hearing. How a Northman could hear cordage creaking through all that sound Tros found it hard to understand; he leaned far over the taffrail, straining eyes and ears.

The Northman warned again, and the man at the helm said something about ghosts in awe-struck undertones. But at last Tros's eyes detected blackness blacker than the night, considerably lower on the water than his own great ship, not more than half a cable's length away. There were no lights, nothing but that spot of utter darkness and a mere suggestion of a sound that did not exactly harmonize with the orchestra of sea and wind.

Rhys's men who had made their choice without much hesitation when the wind had blown the sickness out of them were sleeping by the midship arrow-engines, ready for Orwic to captain them when an engagement should begin. The catapults were useless in the dark, but every Northman had a bow within reach in addition to his ax and dagger. Twelve of the big stinkballs had been set on deck in Conops' charge, the oil-primed fuses ready to insert, a fire-pot and a torch stowed under cover near-by. Below, the drowsy rowers rested on oars indrawn until the blades lay on the ports all ready to be thrust out at a signal.

Tros looked sharply at the shore, and then at the spot of darkness. It was moving very slowly seaward, not toward the coast. It was therefore not a Roman ship. The moon was behind Tros's back as he leaned over the taffrail; clouds obscured it, but the sky was a shade less dark there than in any other direction. Therefore, obviously, since Tros could see the approaching ship, however dimly, whoever was aboard her must have seen the *Liafail*. Yet the ship came on.

"They believe I'm a Roman," Tros muttered.

He turned to the Northman beside him and ordered—

"Stations! Silence!"

The Northman vanished on the run, with Orwic at his heels and there was presently a stir below deck where the sleepy oarsmen were awakened, followed by the clanking of the arrow-engine cranks. Somewhere forward, Conops rolled a stinkball closer to the bulwark.

Hove to, the *Liafail* was drifting gradually seaward, away from the approaching ship, almost bow-on to the stranger, whose captain, likely enough, if he could see three masts, might think there were three ships in the darkness. Suddenly Tros cried aloud in the Roman tongue.

"Ho there! Is yonder port Dertemue?"

The answer came in Celtic—

"Are you Septimus Flaccus with the Spaniards?"

"I am admiral of Cæsar's fleet!" Tros answered. "Come along."

Some one on the approaching ship could understand the Roman speech. She changed her course that instant, looking almost ridiculously undersized and awkward as she came near enough for Tros to see her outline. He touched the helm, not taking it, but guiding the Northman's hand.

"Stand by to grapple!" he roared suddenly. "Out fenders!"

He thought of his new paint even in that crisis, and swore suddenly between his teeth, for as usual, Orwic let go a flight of arrows without waiting for the word. There was tumult aboard the other ship. They put the helm hard over trying to go about, their shrouds missing the great serpent's tongue by inches. It was clumsily done, but it saved them from a second of Orwic's volleys.

"Cease arrow-fire!" Tros roared, his hand on the helm again. A second later there was a crash as the bower-anchor and a great eight-pronged grappling hook beside went down on to the small ship's deck, splintering the timbers.

"Who are you?" Tros shouted. For as much as sixty breaths there was no answer. Sigurdsen came running aft to report that the grapnel held and that six Northmen were on the small ship's deck to make sure none should cut it loose. Tros bade him take the helm and keep the ship hove to.

"Who are you?" he roared again.

An indignant voice answered him:

"I am Britomaris and a pilot with me. Is it so you treat your friends?"

Tros laughed.

"Come aboard, Britomaris! Come before I sink you."

He threw a rope ladder overside and Britomaris climbed it, standing before Tros, startled and indignant.

"Tros?" he said, bending his head to peer into the darkness.

Tros looked like a big black shadow on the poop.

"You thought me sunk in River Thames, now didn't you!" Tros answered, chuckling. "Ho, there! Bring a lantern, some one."

By the light of it he studied Britomaris, wondering that a man so good to see, who stood so upright in his furs and handled a spear so stately, should be such a moral weakling as he knew this man to be.

"You are caught in the act, Britomaris," he said. "Do you know of any reason why I should not take you to Caswallon?"

"Do you dare to fight me, Tros?" Britomaris answered. It was his only possible way out. He did not look as if he liked the prospect. Tros laughed.

"You are a prisoner. I don't fight prisoners. Give me that spear. Now the sword. Now the dagger. So." He threw the weapons on the deck, where a Northman gathered and examined them. "Do you know of any reason why I should not denounce you to Caswallon?"

Britomaris tugged at his moustache, attempting to look dignified, but plainly worried. The Northman who held the lantern grinned.

"No answer? Well, I will tell you a reason. I promised your wife Gwenhwyfar. I have told her I will save you from this infamy."

"Told *her?*" Britomaris stared at him.

"Aye. She and I turned friends at last. When do you expect the Romans?"

"Now. I thought you were—"

"Landlubber!" Tros interrupted. "When saw you a Roman ship like this one? Blind mole! How many ships will the Romans bring?"

"Two, full of Spaniards. Four biremes to protect them."

"Who said so?"

"Caius Rufus, the Roman."

"When did he come?"

"Since nightfall, post haste in a liburnian to bid us light the beacons and to have a pilot ready. He said Cæsar had moved with his wonted suddenness since learning that Tros is dead."

"Zeus! But that fellow is swift!" Tros said admiringly. "Gwenhwyfar's message saying I am dead, with my cloak and a letter to prove it, can hardly have reached Gaul before sunset night before last, and now—aloft there! Use ears and eyes! The wind's against them. The Romans will come rowing!"

"They will come with lights," said Britomaris.

The man had no resistance in him. He was as plastic in Tros's hands as if the two had been master and man for a generation.

"Caius Rufus said they will burn a lantern at each end of the spar of each ship. Will you battle with them, Tros?"

"You too!" Tros answered. "You shall boast to Gwenhwyfar that you played the man this once! Forward with you! Into the deckhouse and take Orwic's orders!"

"Orwic?" said Britomaris, and his jaw dropped.

"Aye! Caswallon's nephew, Orwic! Fall away!"

So Britomaris let a Northman lead him to the deckhouse, and Tros sent Conops overside to clear away the grapnel. But he took no chances; the smaller ship still might warn the Romans.

"Cut away their rigging! Send their sail up here!"

The Northmen's axes answered. They even chopped the mast away.

"Out oars now, and off home!"

It was an hour before the labored thumping of the oars died away in the direction of the shore. Another hour before a Northman at the masthead shouted that he saw lights to the southward. Tros himself went to the masthead then. He counted twelve lights, several miles away, scattered in pairs over a considerable breadth of sea. And he studied them for a long time, trying to determine which might be the ships containing Spaniards and which the escort.

The Romans were poor hands at keeping station on the open sea. Likelier than not the ships were all mixed up together, their commanders satisfied to keep within sight of one another, not anticipating an engagement and confident that they would receive ample warning of the presence of an enemy.

No lights showed on the *Liafail*, but her bulk and her three great spars would show up plainly as soon as dawn should begin to steal along the sky. It lacked an hour of dawn yet and the wind had dropped. Glancing shoreward he could hardly see the beacons. It seemed to him that their crimson flare was being veiled and was spreading on the veil the while it grew dim.

"Fog!" he muttered. He had asked the gods for opportunity!

He returned to the poop and sent for Conops, Sigurdsen and Orwic.

"We will let that fog drift down on us," he said. "If it comes not fast enough we will row toward it. When the Romans can no longer see one another's lights they will start their war trumpets a-blaring. They will low like full cows at milking time. We will pick them off one by one. Their system is to crowd an enemy between the beaks of two or four ships, or to lay alongside and drop their dolphins into her, and to let fall a gangplank with a spike in it. That pins both ships together and along the plank their boarders come with locked shields.

"Now they can not use that gangplank, because our deck is higher than theirs. But they can break our oars, and they can use the iron dolphin, since it hangs above the yardarm. Above all, we must avoid their beaks.

"Orwic, their commanders will not stand at the stern, as I will. They will fight their ships from the top of the midship citadel where the sail, which they will keep spread whether there is wind or not, masks them from an enemy, and whence they can shout to the helmsman as well as direct the javelin- and arrow-fire. So aim first at the citadels and keep those swept with a cross fire from the arrow-engines.

"Sigurdsen, take you the helm. See to it that the sails are well clewed up but ready to be sheeted down with all speed if a wind should come and blow the fog away. This fog, which the gods have sent, is better than forty men to us."

But Sigurdsen was a pessimist.

"It will make the Romans close their ranks, and we will have to fight six ships at once," he grumbled.

"It sets all Northmen free for the fighting, since neither side can use sails!" Tros retorted.

"Aye, and we under-oared, with a half-trained crew! There are nineteen men so weak from vomiting they can't pull their weight, and if the ship rolls—"

"Clew up the sails!" Tros snapped at him. "Then come aft and take the helm."

The giant went forward, grumbling to himself, but Tros had come to understand the pessimism of the man; he liked to set all gloom in a dense formation and then wade into it like a disk into the skittles.

"Conops," he said, "the catapults are useless until fog and darkness lift. You and Glendwyr pick the four best Britons and stand by to serve stinkballs by hand. Let the Britons light the fuses. You and Glendwyr each toss one ball at a time into an enemy's hold, if they come close enough. But no waste, mind! That stuff costs money. Not more than two balls at a time into one ship."

For a long while after that they lay in silence, rolling leisurely, watching the advancing lights grow pale against the brightening cloud bank to the southward. The big ship drifted very slowly on the changing tide toward the fog that crept toward them from the shore. The first out-reaching wisps of it surrounded them as dawn touched the southerly clouds with gold and turned the edges of the mist to silver. Now they could see four of the Roman ships distinctly. The masthead man reported two more following. Tros bit his nails. The mist was still only in wisps around him. He feared the sun gleaming on the golden serpent might betray his presence too soon.

The four ships in the lead, less than half a mile apart, were armed biremes. According to the masthead man's report, the two-ship convoy trailed a long way in the rear. He must get between the warships and the convoy and engage the biremes one by one, avoiding all collision and yet steering close enough for Conops to lob stinkballs into them. Conops and Glendwyr could hardly toss the leaden balls much farther than an oar-length. If he should smash the oars by coming too close, he had plenty of spares ready; but he knew what a panic there would be below decks when the broken oar ends knocked the rowers off the benches. He must avoid that even at the cost of letting more than half the enemy escape him.

A breath of warm air brought the fog rolling down in clouds at last, and presently Tros heard the war horns blaring on the Roman ships. The fog moved fast; if it should be one of those narrow, longshore streaks that hug the coast of Britain most days of the year, it might vanish too soon.

"Starboard a little, starboard!" he directed, leaning overside to listen for the horn blare. "Hold her so."

Then he took his stand where the drum and cymbal men below the poop could see the wand he held in his right hand. But he made no signal to them until the blare of the nearest horn came from astern and a Roman, aware of something looming, hailed him through the fog.

Then action, swift and resolute! He signaled to the cymbals and a crash of brass shook all the oarsmen into life. The water boiled alongside and the ship swung with a lurch as Sigurdsen leaned all his weight against the steering oar, his left foot on the rail and his muscles cracking.

"Stand by all! Ready on the starboard bow there, Conops! Fire when you see them, Orwic!"

He had one bireme by the stern, at any rate. No danger from the dolphin, almost none to the oars if Sigurdsen kept his head. He signaled the cymbals, quickening the oar beat. The men at the masthead yelled incomprehensibly. There was a terror-stricken, flatted chorus from the Roman trumpets and the bireme loomed up like a ghost.

"Zeus!"

Sigurdsen threw his weight against the helm, or a bank of oars would have gone to splinters. The air twanged as if the devils of the underworld were plucking death's harps, whistled as if death were on the wing—four midship arrow-engines—and then Orwic's voice:

"Reload! Lud's blood, what are you waiting for?"

Yells from the bireme, two thuds as the leaden balls struck woodwork, Conops crying, "Two hits!" and the ghost was gone. Fog, but a glare in the fog and the shouts of men who struggled to extinguish flame but choked in the stench and were forced back by the prodigious heat! Fog, and the blare of horns ahead. Shouts and a thrashing of water where another bireme came about to find out what the matter might be.

"Stop oars!"

The drums and cymbals crashed in sudden unison that checked the oars in mid-swing. Tros let the great ship carry way and for a minute listened to the Roman oar-beats, knowing that his silence would confuse the Romans and that his own man at the masthead, being higher, would see sooner than the Romans could. Astern now, there was a crimson splurge like sunset in the fog, where a bireme burned.

"Right on us! Straight ahead!" The masthead man lapsed into Norse again.

"Beak! Their beak's right into us!" yelled Conops from the bow.

But the Roman helmsman saw the serpent's tongue in air above the bireme's bow and changed course in a panic. The ships struck shoulder on and, in the crash that threw the oarsmen off the benches, none heard the leaden balls thud down the bireme's forward hatch and roll among the rowers. Conops' voice cried:

"Two hits! Back away, master! Back away!"

The arrow-engines twanged, and the Romans came back with a hail of javelins. There was a great splash, for they let the dolphin go and it missed by the width of the roll of both ships as they reeled back from the impact.

Javelins again—*twang, twang,* and shriek of the twelve-arrow flights; a din below decks as the rowers of both ships rioted. The Romans had the better discipline, but there was stenching fire in their hold, whereas Tros's men were only bewildered. Crash of Tros's drums and cymbals signaling for backed oars; the choking, acrid reek of greenish-yellow smoke, emerging from the bireme's hatch; response from the oars at last. As the Northmen plied their bows from anywhere on deck and Orwic's arrow-engines, cranking, twanging, screaming, swept the bireme's citadel, the reflection of a crimson glare lit on the serpent's golden tongue. Its agate eyes shone. It appeared to laugh as, curtseying to the swell and the staccato jerk of backed oars, it retired into the fog.

Tros laughed. Two biremes reckoned with! Two crimson splurges in the fog, and only two more ships to find and fight before those Spaniards were his!

But suddenly he swore. The fog was lifting! He could see the shore already and the burning biremes were in such full view that the crew of the nearest began manning the ballista that was farthest from the flame. An arrow two yards long feathered with burning pitch hummed overhead, and a second fell short as the backed oars took him out of range.

There were wounded Northmen on the deck, but he had no time to spare for them. In another minute now the hurrying mist would vanish and reveal him to the other biremes and to the ships that carried Spaniards. He ordered—

"Stop!"

And quicker than the echo of the drums and cymbals he was off the poop and down the after-hatch, where he stood and roared to the rowers, taking care that laughter, triumph should beam from his face:

"Good men!" There were half a dozen of them stunned between the benches. "Two big ships beaten by your steadfastness! When I call for speed, let oars bend! Ye have done well. Now do better!"

In an instant he was on the poop again, his eyes searching the fog's afterguard that still concealed him from four Roman ships.

"Orwic!" he roared, and Orwic's boyish face appeared in the deck-house door. "Man the bow catapults! Leave Glendwyr to the arrow-engines. Conops! Stand by Orwic!"

Presently, to the sound of grinding, great weights rose between the uprights and the magazine crews rolled the leaden balls into the racks provided. Conops began fitting fuses, soaking them with sulphur and oil of turpentine. Tros ordered Sigurdsen to shake down the great mainsail. He could spare no men for more than that, just yet. And as the big sail bellied in the wind the last fog streamers scattered southward, showing all four ships, and him to them.

The apparition of Tros's great vermilion-sided *Liafail,* with three masts and her long-tongued serpent flashing in the sun, struck terror in the Romans. They knew nothing of how dangerously he was undermanned. Two biremes, widely separated from each other and at least two miles away from their crowded convoys, 'bouted helm and ran for it, clapping on all sail to help the oars and striving to get between Tros and the Spaniards.

"Full speed!"

A race began in which Tros was badly handicapped. If he had clapped on more sail, he would have had no men to spare to serve the catapults.

Along two legs of a skalene triangle, its apex the slow convoys, Tros and the biremes raced, Tros with the shorter course, but they with full crews, going nearly two to his one. Around them and about them splashed the stinkballs, as the great weights thumped into the hold, outranging the Roman ballistas easily, but making no hits. Tros ground his teeth at the waste of precious ammunition.

He ordered, "cease fire," ordered the great forward lateen sail sheeted down, thinning out the catapult crews to the point where they were hardly enough to crank the weights, ordered the oar stroke quickened until there was so much splashing that he had to slow it down again. And in spite of all, the biremes gained on him hand over hand, until at last, while the leader raced on to tranship the Spaniards from the slower craft and carry them back to Gaul, the other turned and offered fight.

It was the act of a bold captain. No solitary bireme had the slightest chance against that great ship boiling down on him. The terrific speed had tired the Roman's rowers, who had hardly strength enough by now to give force to the iron-shod ram. Tros changed the helm and kept away from him to westward.

"Fire both catapults!"

One missed. The other, laid by Orwic, hurled its lead ball straight against the bireme's citadel, smashing through the woodwork and exploding. Then the Roman captain changed his mind. His ship on fire, he turned in a wide circle and began to race again toward the convoys.

"Try again, Orwic!"

Two more balls whirled on their way, and again one missed, but the second—Conops aimed it—smashed through the bireme's deck and, though it did not burst, the cloud of suffocating smoke increased. The oars collapsed, like the legs of a dying centipede, as the whole crew, marvelously disciplined, went to work to extinguish fire.

"They are mine!" laughed Tros, his eyes fixed on the convoys.

But that other, swifter bireme lay already beam to beam with the nearest of the transports. They had lowered their spiked gangplank and a stream of armed men poured along it to the roof of the bireme's citadel. Before Tros could prevent, both forward catapults went off with a crash and shudder. Two of the leaden stinkballs hit their mark, one into either ship. Orwic, Conops and the whole deck crew went frantic with delight as both exploded. There was an instant blaze too great for Tros's explosive to have caused; one ball had burst into the Roman magazine, where they had stored their own pitch and sulphur, and both ships with their crowd of panic-stricken men, were swallowed in a reeking cloud of smoke, shot through with flame.

Tros changed the course to pursue the second convoy. Then he went up forward and took Orwic by the throat.

"Hot-headed horseman!" he swore, forcing him backward against the catapult. "Those last two shots have cost me ten-score men!"

He shook him, but he could not take the laugh off Orwic's face.

"Look! Lud's teeth, but look!" he exclaimed, and, breaking away from Tros's grip, watched the two locked ships, one mass of flame, sinking.

Tros took no pleasure in the sight. His eye was on one bireme to the northward that had managed to subdue the fire in her hold and was picking up survivors from another bireme nearer shore. The third, a mile this side of them, was losing its fight with the flames.

"Get aft, Orwic!" Then he ordered both the catapults uncranked, and told off men to care for the nine wounded—arrow and javelin wounds, not good to look at and not easy to treat. A Northman screamed and bit the deck beside him as they pulled out a barbed arrow-head and poured hot tar into the wound.

"Conops!" Tros commanded. "Take one stinkball and stand in the bow. When I lay alongside those Spaniards have the fuse ready, but don't light it until I give the word. If I do, then drop it into their hold to scare them out."

Again he went down through the hatch to encourage the rowers. Sigurdsen sent a messenger to say they were almost within arrow range of the ship they were pursuing. Then he went up slowly and stood staring over the stern. The capture of the last ship was a foregone certainty. It hardly interested him. It hardly troubled him to see the Romans burn and drown, for they were trouble hunters with the game reversed on them. But it grieved him to the deep, strong marrow of his being to have lost two hundred and fifty Spaniards.

"Good, spirited, unruly rebels to a man!" he muttered. "I could have given them their chance. The gods gave me mine, and I let Orwic rob me!"

Sigurdsen nudged him.

"Carry on!" Tros ordered. Then, when they were beam to beam with the slow, helpless ship he ordered the oars in through the ports and roared to the ship's captain to come about and heave to, setting the example. The man—he was a long-haired Gaul—obeyed.

More than two hundred blue-eyed Spaniards, armed with swords, spears, shields and javelins, crowded the deck.

"Where is your captain?" Tros asked in the Roman tongue. The Gaul laughed drily.

"They threw him overboard. He did not please them."

"How so?"

"They are hungry. There was no food."

"Sigurdsen! Lower away the boats!"

When both the boats were in the water Tros gave orders to the Spaniards to throw their weapons into them. A few splashed overside, but presently the boats came back with swords, spears, javelins, shields and helmets, loaded to the gunwale. Then he ordered a hundred Spaniards brought from ship to ship, which was as many as he dared to have at one time, until he had subdued them properly. Next, he put a small crew of Northmen aboard the Gaulish ship and passed a towrope.

"There is one Roman bireme still afloat," said Orwic, pointing. "She runs home."

"Let her! We will have our hands full with these Spaniards. Let the Romans go and tell their tale to Cæsar!"

A great Spaniard swaggered up to him.

"Who are you?" he demanded, not exactly insolently. He was curious and, beyond the ordinary run of mortals, proud.

"I am admiral of Cæsar's fleet!" said Tros. "By right of my appointment I transfer you to my ship. Get forward!"

The Spaniard went to sit and whisper with his friends and watch and wonder.

CHAPTER LXVI

MEN—MEN—MEN!

In my day I have known eighteen kings, but not one who had enough wisdom to laugh at himself. Caswallon the king came nearest to it. But even he believed his enemies were something other than the goads employed by Destiny to rouse his energy. As a master is, so are his men. I know a people if I know its rulers.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

It was a long pull back to Vectis, with a favoring wind but one third of the time and a heavy, sow-bellied Gaulish freighter in tow. One hundred Spaniards were put to the oars, but they refused work, although they understood oars, were not seasick and, in a blue-eyed opportunist fashion of their own, were not unreasonable.

Tros sent for the man who had first accosted him when captured.

"Who—what are you?" he demanded. The man's muscles stood out like molded ivory. He smiled with a kind of traditional dignity, as if life were something that his ancestors had borne and he supposed, he, too, could tolerate it.

"I am Jaun Aksue of Escual-Herria,"* he said in Gaulish. "There was fighting in my country, between us and the Romans. Their proconsul set a trap and caught a thousand of us, of whom he slew one half. The rest of us he sent to Cæsar to help fight Gauls. Cæsar armed and drilled us but we stole his weapons and helped the Gauls in various ways. So Cæsar decided to send us to Britain. How are you an admiral of Cæsar's fleet and yet attack the Romans?"

"Were you not a Roman soldier and yet helped Gauls?" Tros answered.

"True. I would have helped the Britons perhaps, or perhaps not. Who knows? We Eskualdenak† are not such fools as Cæsar thinks."

"Then you and I are of one mind," said Tros. "It is because I am not such a fool as Cæsar thinks that you are my prisoner."

"We Eskualdenak are not good prisoners. We are worse slaves," the man answered. "You have enough slaves on this ship without increasing trouble for yourself. What do you propose to do with us, O Admiral?"

Tros, stroking his chin, studied the man.

"Are you these men's leader?"

"In a sense, yes. They elected me to lead them. In our land all are noblemen. But Cæsar's officer degraded me for what he said was insolence. We threw him overboard," he added casually.

Tros did not propose to cut in halves another opportunity by

* The country of the Basques.

† Basques.

having to use force where argument would better serve. But he needed the right argument.

"Will you go home?" he asked suddenly.

"Not we! The Roman proconsul, Livius, would crucify us, unless we should take to the mountains. We are a sea-faring folk. We hunt whales. But Livius burned our ships."

"Will you settle in Britain?"

"Who knows? You have a marvel of a ship. We might sail with you, if you should make it worth while."

"Make it worth my while!" Tros answered. "Of what value is your word?"

The man looked straight into Tros's eyes.

"To you? Why, just the value that you set on it. I never supposed it could have a market price. No more did Livius, the Roman, or he would have taxed it a tenth. How should a man sell his word?"

Tros grinned. He liked him.

"Jaun," he said—and Jaun meant nobleman, a title that all men of that race prefixed to their names; but Tros did not know that, and the word was easy to remember—"I am the master of this ship. I am obeyed. And I am minded that you Eskualdenak will make a good crew. But I must have your word on it."

"Whither will you sail?" the man asked.

"Whither I will."

"How much will you pay us?"

"As much as I see fit, and for the present, nothing except food and clothing. My men prosper as I prosper, sweat and starve, too, as I sweat and starve, save that I take the master's end of it and sweat the hardest."

"Are you an equal among equals?"

"By Zeus, no! I am master of this ship!"

"I like you," said Jaun Aksue. He spoke with dignity, as if he had conferred a boon that were his to refuse, were he minded. "I will speak about this to my friends. If we agree to serve you, we will serve. You will not sell us to the Romans?"

"I will sooner die," Tros answered. "But mark this, and remember it: I will also rather die than not be master of my ship. It is I who confer favors, and the price is full obedience."

"I will speak to them of that." Jaun Aksue went down into the hold.

It was an hour before he returned on deck and then, with Tros's permission, went swarming along the towrope, taking his ducking in the bight and climbing on to the Gaulish vessel with a nimbleness that forced unwilling praise from Conops, for Conops disliked to believe that there were seamen half as handy as himself. At the end of another hour he returned in the same way, swung himself up over the poop and stood dripping before Tros.

"We accept," he said simply. There and then Tros dubbed him Jaun and gave him the rank of a lieutenant under Sigurdsen.

They dropped anchor under the lee of chalk cliffs between the Isle of Vectis and the mainland. All three banks of oars on either side, Britons and Spaniards alternating, had been in full use for a day and there was a new energy, a new, clean finish, a new majesty to the measured swing and a deep-sea certainty about the plunge of the vermilion blades that made Tros's heart thump.

Orwic espied Caswallon first. He lowered a boat, taking his own four men and some of Tros's slaves, hurrying to meet the clumsy barge that labored out of harbor under sail and sweeps. Orwic was shouting the news before boat and barge met, so Fflur and Caswallon knew most of it already when they both embraced Tros on the *Liafail's* high poop, Fflur's eyes frankly wet, Caswallon praising the great ship to hide his own emotion.

"Men!" said Tros. "I have men!"

"Aye, and I peace! Rhys is dead. I slew him! Came Gwenhwyfar, hot-horsed, blurting out the whole of Rhys's plot. Fflur coaxed me to spare the woman, but I slew Rhys. Some said to catch and torture him, but Rhys was of the council. I would almost as soon torture my own son. I sent him warning and he understood. He took to the forest with twenty men, hoping to reach Gaul, but when I overtook him his men threw down their arms. Rhys, he drew bow but missed me by that much."

Caswallon measured off the third part of his thumbnail and Fflur shuddered.

"My arrow went into his heart," he added, "so he died in fair fight, and the council was not dishonored. I found letters on him, written by Cæsar's secretary. He and Cæsar had it all planned, but I think Cæsar will not invade us now Rhys is dead."

Tros did not answer for the moment. Fflur saw Britomaris standing by the deckhouse door, bow and arrows in his hand as if to advertise the fact that he had fought against the Romans. She drew Caswallon's attention. Eyebrows raised, he questioned Tros.

"A poor fool," Tros said. "His wife will tame him. I tamed Gwenhwyfar."

Caswallon laughed.

"She is as tame as the wind! But we endure the wind. I think you have tamed Cæsar. What is it? Four ships sunk?"

"Three. One escaped. Cæsar will learn whom he may thank. What of Rhys's men whom I hold hostage?"

"All Rhys's property is mine. I give them to you. Hah! How Cæsar will be chewing flints in Gaul! Three biremes and—"

Tros interrupted.

"Caswallon, mend your fences! For love of you and Britain I will go to Rome. I will do my utmost to break Cæsar's wheel. If I fail, then mark you, Cæsar will invade Britain as surely as we see each other!"

"We must pray more to the gods," said Fflur.

"The gods," he said, "make opportunities. Prayer consists in seizing opportunities. That is how Cæsar prays! I also. I prayed for Spaniards! I have them. Pray you for a stout heart, wisdom, and the men, men, men!"

CHAPTER LXVII

"PLUTO! SHALL I SET FORTH FULL OF DREADS AND QUESTIONS?"

Whence I came, I know. Whither I go, I know not. Here I am. I know not why these things are, nor what they shall be. But I discover that if I choose not, I am chosen; and I love the valiance of choosing rather than the vain, unvaliant obedience to ease, which I perceive is slavery.

Unvaliant scud I am not, blown on the gales of circumstance. Valiance, I think, shall not die, though the storm may wreck me and the waves drown.

What is valiance? I know not. But I love it, and it loves me. Let us see whither valiance leads.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

FAREWELL to Caswallon was an event. There was something mystic in the air off Vectis. The cry of the gulls that circled around the great ship was the music of far horizons. Tros felt himself an agent of Destiny. He wore his purple cloak for the occasion, and his sword in its vermilion scabbard hung from a belt set with jewels. His eyes glowed beneath the gold band that encircled his forehead. The crushing obstinacy of his jaw and chin, the oak-strength of his neck and the masterful lines of mouth and nostril were exposed for whoso would to read. One would oppose him at one's own risk.

"We will see," he remarked, and the three words told his character.

A druid leaned forward from a seat beside the cabin door, mildly rebuking:

"You will see too much. You are like a bull that breaks the fences. Because you have been told the world is round—"

Tros interrupted. He laughed.

"I will prove it. I will sail around it."

"At your own risk!" the druid answered. "We have trusted you. In Britain you have built your ship with Britons' aid, of British oak and sheathed with British tin. Her sails and her ropes are of British flax. Your slaves, more than half of her crew, are all Britons whom the Lord Caswallon gave to you."

"The Lord Tros earned them," said Caswallon, gesturing with a blue-stained, white, enormous hand.

Tros smiled, and their eyes met. Those two understood each other far better than either of them understood the druid.

"We gave you pearls out of our treasure," said the druid. "Those were for a purpose."

"Aye," Tros answered, leaning back against the table, squeezing the edge of it in both hands until knuckles and muscles stood out in knots. A sort of thrifty look was in his eyes now. "A man can not keep such a ship as mine on nothing. Wind blows us, but the men eat meat. There is more wear and tear to pay for than a landsman thinks. I will make a profit, but I will not forget to serve you in the making."

"Not if you turn aside to prove what you have no business to know," the druid answered. "Whether the world is round or flat—and mark you, on that I am silent—your friends, to whom you are beholden, are in peril."

Caswallon snorted like a war-horse, but Fflur laid a jeweled hand on him and, with her dark gray eyes, begged silence.

"When I forget my friends, may all the gods forget me," Tros said solemnly, frowning, not liking that his promise should be called in question. "I itch, I ache, I yearn to prove the world is round. But I know better than to fare forth on that quest and leave promises unkept behind me. Not while Cæsar is free to invade Britain will I reckon myself free to spread sail straight toward the setting sun. In Rome, as I have told you half a hundred times, are Cæsar's enemies, his friends and all the riffraff who will take whichever side is uppermost. One way or another I will break the spokes of Cæsar's wheel before I set forth on my own adventure. If I fail in Rome, I will come back to Britain and help you."

Fflur shook her head.

"You will never return," she remarked. "That is why I wish Orwic were not sailing with you."

Orwic laughed. "Tros is like the northeast wind. I love him. I will go around the world with him," he said. "But I wish he had horses instead of a ship!"

He took up the peaked iron helmet he had laid on the table, turned it bottom upward and began to rock it like a boat.

"However, I overcame the vomiting last voyage when we took the Spaniards. I am a sailor."

Jaun Aksue shook his head:

"Wait until you have seen the sea! All you have played on yet is this streak of water between Gaul and Britain."

The druid, watching opportunity, resumed the thread of his remarks, while Aksue and Orwic eyed each other, mutually critical.

"Lord Tros, how will you reach Rome? Ostia lies leagues from Rome. You can not sail this ship up the Tiber, which is the Roman river. We druids are informed concerning such things."

"Yes, and you know the world is round!" Tros retorted, grinning at him.

But the druid held to his point.

"How will you go to Rome? Will you dare to leave your ship at Ostia? What is to prevent the Romans from seizing your ship? They will charge you with piracy. Your father held a Roman license to sail anywhere he pleased; yet how many times have you told us that Cæsar charged him with piracy and flogged the crew to death simply because he disapproved of Cæsar's policy?"

"Zeus!" Tros exploded, spreading his shoulders and kicking his scabbard. "I cross bridges when I reach them."

"There is a bridge to Rome," the druid answered. "It is Gades. Go first of all to Gades."

"I might," Tros answered. "I have a friend in Gades who owes me money. The place is a Roman port, but the gods approve a man who seizes danger by the snout."

"Now listen," said the druid, "for you sail soon, and I would not delay you. You are a bold man and cunning. Danger is only a challenge to your will. But there will be dangers to the left and to the right, before and behind."

"Pluto! Shall I set forth full of dreads and questions? Had I listened to the yawpings of disaster's friends I should never have set foot in Britain! I should never have sunk Cæsar's fleet, never have built my own ship, never have gathered a crew, never have found the stuff to make the hot stink for my catapults! Do you bid me go forth full of fear?"

"Nay, but I bid you beware of risks."

Tros's amber eyes blazed proudly.

"I am the master of the biggest ship that ever sailed these seas! 'Beware of risks!' saith the Lord Druid. Half a thousand souls and all my fortune at the risk of wind and tide, reefs, shoals, gales on the Atlantic, every Roman on the seas my enemy, myself proscribed, three talents on my head, pirates, water and provisions to obtain in harbors that swarm with Cæsar's friends— 'Be cautious!' saith the Lord Druid!"

"Be bold, Lord Tros!" said Fflur, her gray eyes watching his. But the druid signed to her not to interfere.

"Trust Tros," laughed Orwic. "I tell you he is bolder than the northeast wind!"

Tros struck a gong and glanced at the three water clocks. A Northman appeared in the doorway.

"Tide?" said Tros.

"Still making. Nearly at the ebb, my lord."

"Order the blankets stowed below. Wind?"

"Light breeze from the eastward."

"Mist?"

"All clear, my lord. Sven at the masthead says he can see the coast of Gaul."

"There," said Tros, "is the answer of the gods to all your doubts! A fair wind!"

He began to pace the cabin floor, his hands behind him, kicking at his scabbard as he turned. The druid watched him, alert for an opening into which to drive an admonition. Tros offered him none. The druid had to resume the subject uninvited.

"Lord Tros, those Eskualdenak of yours are Cæsar's men. If they should be caught, they would be crucified—and you along with them. Yet unless you go to Gades first, it is impossible for you to go to Ostia and Rome. I tell you, in the midst of danger you shall find the keys of safety. But beware of black arts and of violence. There are some who seem untrustworthy, whom you may safely trust, and some who may be bought and some not. We druids have read the stars."

"Rot me all riddles!" Tros answered irritably, but the druid ignored the remark.

"Lord Tros, I could direct you to a man in Gades, who would give you information. But I see you are not open-minded. None the less, you are a brave man and your heart is true to friendship, so I will do what may be done for you."

Tros bowed. He thought more of a druid's blessing than of his material advice. To his mind the druids had lost contact between spiritual thought and the action that a man must take with two feet on the ground.

"I go," he said, turning to Caswallon, for he felt the ship's changed motion as the anchor-cable slackened and the wind made her dance a little on the ebb.

The druid, Caswallon and Fflur stood up to take their leave of him and Fflur's gray eyes were moist. Caswallon's face, normally good-humored and amused, wore a mask of stolidness to hide emotion that he scorned as womanly. Orwic looked bored, since that was his invariable refuge from the spurs of sentiment.

"I go," Tros repeated, and stood straight before them all, the light through the door on his face, and his lion's eyes glowing against it with the light that blazed up from within. He was minded they should have a bold friend and a brave sight to remember in the dark days coming, when their country should await invasion, and himself afar off. He was minded they should not believe it possible he would neglect to serve them to the last breath and the last ounce of his energy.

"It is thanks to you," he said, "that I have my ship that was my heart's desire, and I will not forget you. It may be I will never come again. I am no druid, and I can not see, like Fflur, with the eyes of destiny. But know ye this: I am a friend in need as in prosperity. Ye may depend on me to worry Cæsar's rear until he turns away from Britain. But be ready for invasion, because Cæsar certainly intends to try a second time.

"If he invades, resist him to the last ditch, to the last fence, to the last yard of your realm. And though they tell you I am dead or have betrayed you—for Cæsar's favorite weapon is false rumor—know that I persist until the end in trying all means to weaken Cæsar from the rear. All means I will try. Truth I will tell to those who will believe it. I will lie, and craftily, to them who deal in lies. Fairly I will deal with honest men. So the gods shall aid me. But believe ye in your own star as well as in my friendship."

"Good-by!" Fflur said, choking, and embraced him.

Orwic turned away and strode out through the open door. He hated scenes. His eyes were wet, which would not do at all. He was a British gentleman. Caswallon, muttering "Lud's blood!" swung Tros toward him by the arms and smote him on the breast a time or two.

"Tros, Tros!" he said, forcing a grin. "I would rather you would stay here and share Lud's luck with us! It grieves me that you go."

"Friendship begets grief!" Tros answered, patting the tall, fair-haired chief between the shoulder-blades. "Grief eats courage, so beware of it. Caswallon, my friend, you and I were not born to mope like vultures over vain regrets. Friendship is a fire that tests both parties to it, so let you and me stand firmer, the more circumstances strain. It heartens me to know that you and Fflur have called me friend. I go forth proud of it!"

"Go then!" Caswallon answered, making his voice gruff lest it should tremble. "Lud's luck go with you! And know this: Come what may—come rumor, and though all the world and Cæsar swear you have played us false, we will believe in you!"

"Tide!" That was Sigurdsen's voice from the poop. "Tide and a fair wind!"

There came a whistle in-between-decks, where the captains of the oar-banks piped all rowers to the benches; then a clatter as the oar-blades rattled on the ports.

"Haul short!" Sigurdsen again. And then a sing-song and a clanking at the capstan.

Tros led the way on deck. Extravagantly he had ordered the purple sails bent for the occasion. His eyes went aloft to where the Northmen lay on the yards to shake them loose. He turned his back on Orwic, because Fflur wept on the young man's shoulder, and he knew what agonies of shame and nervousness that scene imposed on a British aristocrat. Orwic's funny little peaked helmet had been pushed over one eye, and he was biting his moustache. Caswallon laughed, which brought a curse to Orwic's lips, but Tros leaned overside and shouted at the crew of fishermen who were bringing alongside the barge on which the druid, Caswallon and Fflur were to go ashore.

"Easy! Easy, you lubbers! If you scrape my paint— Out fenders there!" He had spent a goodly percentage of Cæsar's gold on sulphur and quick-silver to make the ship's sides splendid with vermilion.

There had to be more embracing before Fflur went overside. The British had a sort of ritual of parting. It broke all restraint. But Tros, for the sake of the crew, preserved his air of grandeur.

He stood the whole deck crew at quarters and saluted with a burst of trumpets and a roll of drums as Fflur and Caswallon went down the ladder. Then he turned to face the druid, for the druid waited.

There came a silence on deck and aloft. The druid, with his eyes on Tros, drew out the golden sickle from his girdle. He was mild-eyed, but the eyes were bright with fasting and with having contemplated stars and Mysteries.

"In the midst of danger thou shalt find the keys of safety," he repeated. "Win Rome in Gades!"

Then the sickle, flashing in the sunlight, moved in mystic circles over Tros's head, severing whatever threads of hidden influence might bind him to the sources of disaster. Upturned, it received, as does the new moon, affluence and wisdom; reversed, it outpoured blessings on his head. Point first, it touched his breast above the heart, invoking honesty and courage; presently it passed in ritual of weaving movements before eyes, ears, nose, lips, hands and feet, arousing all resourcefulness, then tapped each shoulder to confer the final blessing. Then the druid spoke:

"Offspring of Earth, Air, Fire, Water and the Nameless, go forth accoutred. As a sun's ray, go thou forth! A light amid the darkness! A land among the waters! A friend among the friendless, and a serpent! * Be a strength amid the weakness! Be a man amid the elements! Whereso thy foot shall tread, be justice done! Whatso thy tongue shall speak, be truth unveiled! Be strong! Be of the gods who give and guide and not of them who snare and take away! That voice within thee, judge thee! Be thy hand the servant of thy soul!"

Blessing ship and crew with arms upraised, lips moving to the said-to-be-forgotten Word, the druid turned and went, all keeping silence until, like some white-haired pilot of the years, he had descended to the waiting barge.

"Up anchor!" Tros roared. Then, as the clanking capstan brought the cable in, "Make sail there! Sheet her home!"

The purple sails spread fluttering and bellied as the ship swung slowly on the tide before the light breeze. On the poop Tros raised his baton. Drums and cymbals crashed. The oars went out in three long banks on either side. Cymbals for the "ready" and then crash of brass and alternating drum-beat as the water boiled alongside and the great ship leaped ahead, her serpent's tongue a-flicker in the sun.

"I am a man! I live! I laugh!" Tros told himself as he eyed those

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* The symbol of wisdom.

purple sails and turned to wave his hand toward the barge that danced amid the gulls along the white wake astern.

CHAPTER LXVIII

OFF GADES

Sent I a fool on my errand? It was I who sent him. Counted I not on his folly? That is my fault. Though he suffer for it, it was I who sent him. It is I who pay, unless I counted on his folly to decoy an adversary, who might have been cautious unless he perceived he had a fool to deal with.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

How to put into a port controlled by Romans, with part of his crew composed of two hundred and fifty deserters of Cæsar's army, without falling foul of Cæsar's letters of proscription was a problem that Tros left to the gods to clear up for him, although he already had a hint of the solution in his mind. Meanwhile, there was work a-plenty—head winds and off-shore winds, flat calms with a heavy ground-swell that made the bucking rowers grunt, and squally weather in which whales played all around the ship, nearly causing a mutiny because he would not let Jaun Aksue and his Eskualdenak turn aside to hunt them.

"Thus we kill whales. With a spear we slay them. It is easy. We will slay two. You may tow them into Gades,* making haste because the sharks will follow, eating at their undersides. The dead whales float, I promise you, and they are worth much money. Romans buy the meat; the traders buy the bone; the Spaniards buy the skin for sandals, shields, mule-harness—"

"Let live," Tros answered. "I hunt bigger fish."

"Aye, but you pay us nothing. Give us a chance to turn the whale meat into money, that we may drink in Gades. I tell you, Lord Tros, we haven't tasted red wine since the sour, thin stuff that Cæsar fed to us. We Eskualdenak are noblemen, who like to get drunk now and then."

But one of the things that Tros had learned in many foreign ports was the difference between a crew mad drunk on its own earned money, and the same crew equally drunk on its master's bounty.

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* The modern Cadiz.

"You shall drink at my expense in Gades," he remarked, and the tawny-haired soldier of fortune swaggered forward where he discussed with his companions the pros and cons of taking the ship away from Tros and hunting whales until she was full of the bone and blubber.

But for three days and three nights waves, tide, current and the wind fought Tros for the mastery. No sight of sun, no stars nor moon, nothing to gage direction by except the shrieking wind and —now and then when he dared it—thunder of the surf against high cliffs.

But Tros only approached the lee shore twice to find a headland that he recognized, and that was after he had left the dreaded rocks and isles of Finis Terræ * far astern.

Twice—yet he made his landfall. He hove the ship to, within sight of Gades Bay in the late afternoon of the eleventh day out from Vectis, sending three men to the mastheads to keep watch for Roman ships. He covered the serpent's head with 'paulin lest the setting sun should glitter on its gold-leaf and attraction attention. His ship was notched against the western sky, but her vermilion top-sides merged into the sunset splurge, and it was possible her masts might not be seen if none was actually watching for them.

Seated at the table in the cabin he clipped a piece of parchment from a roll, mixed gum with sepia from cuttlefish, chewed the point of a pen to his liking and sent for Orwic.

"Lud love me, Tros, but the land smells good!" said Orwic, making himself easy on Tros's bunk.

"Can you speak the Roman tongue?" Tros asked him.

"You know I can't. When I was a boy I learned a few words from a Roman trader who was cast up on the beach. He was killed soon afterwards for taking liberties with women. Even in the battle on the beach last year I couldn't remember a word of it. I wanted to yell the wrong commands to Cæsar's men and confuse them until our chariots could ride them down and—"

Tros interrupted, leaning forward with an elbow on the table. "Gaulish? Can you speak that with a Gaulish accent?"

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* The modern Finisterre and Isle of Ushant.

"Near enough. You know as well as I do that we Britons speak the same tongue as the Gauls. What ails you, Tros? Your eyes look like a madman's. Are you shipsick?"

"Do you dare—" his voice was hoarse with the strain of bellowing his orders to the crew and from the long vigil through the storm—"do you dare to go ashore to-night with Conops to guide you, to the house of a friend of mine?"

Orwic barked delightedly.

"Friend Tros, I would swim to Gades, just for the feel of good earth!"

"This is a worse risk than a swim. Fail—there is a low hill behind Gades, outside the city wall, where cross-roads meet. The hill bristles with dead trees that bear ill-smelling fruit. The Romans flog a man before they crucify him, flog him until his intestines hang and—"

"Rot me talk of failure!" Orwic answered. "Tell me what shall be if I succeed."

"*Tchutt!* I must go myself. I need a cautious man."

"Lud's belly! Tros, you shall not! Listen! Who has better right than I to run a risk for my friends in Britain?"

Orwic leaned across the table. His face flushed. He looked as handsome as Apollo.

"Some man," Tros said, "who will take care. No hot-head can succeed in this adventure."

"Tros, I blow cold! I am as crafty as a fox! I forswear horsemanship! I never rode a horse! I never drove a chariot! I am a tortoise! Burn me this great creaking lumber-wain of a tin-bellied boat, and set me on dry land! I am a paragon of caution! Dumb I am, a lurker in shadows, a rap-a-door-and-run man! Tros, there is none aboard this ship who can do half as well!"

Tros knew it, but he kept the knowledge to himself and let Orwic do all the persuading.

"I need a modest man. The gods love modesty," he said with the air of a money-lender refusing to do business.

"I am modesty!" said Orwic.

"You!" Tros leaned back in his oaken chair and laughed. "Modest? Three nights gone I heard you praying that the storm might cease, instead of praising the sea's splendor and returning thanks for guts enough to ride it out!"

"It was the Northmen prayed," said Orwic.

"Aye. But who bade them? Who paid them? Who gave Skram, the skald,* a gold-piece for his pains? I saw you."

"Tros, you see too much. Our British gods are of field and river. These Northmen are sailors and their gods are—"

"Cripples!" Tros exploded. "Rot me such a god as likes to see good seamen on their knees! There are gods in Gades, Orwic, but they'll go their own gait. It's for the man who does my work to-night to suit their whimsies, not they his."

"Well, I will be whimsical," said Orwic. "The gods shall like me very well."

He stooped and scooped up sand out of the box that was kept in readiness to put out fire, and heaped six handfuls of the wet stuff on the table. Then he smoothed it out.

"So, draw me Gades. Show me the house I must find."

"Conops knows the house," said Tros, but he drew, none the less, with his forefinger, beginning with a circle for the city wall, then marking the five gates and making dots to represent the forum, the temple of Venus and the gladiators' barracks, with a veritable maze of streets between. "This is the governor's house. Avoid it as you would death! Now, from the western gate due eastward, do you see? Then this way, to the right, to a point about midway along the street. Turn your back to the west, and forward. The house of Simon the Jew stands nearly at the apex of a triangle that has for base the street between the forum and the gladiators' school.

"It is a house built half of timber, half of mud, smeared with a yellow plaster that will make it look like stone by night. Simon is a rich Jew with the privilege of armed slaves—quite a few of them. There will be dozens of dogs in the street and the Gades dogs are bad, I warn you. There used to hang a lantern on a chain from the front of Simon's house to the wall opposite. The citizenry have used that chain a time or two to hang night prowlers. None can approach the house unseen because the lamp has several wicks and casts a bright light."

"I will walk up brazenly," said Orwic.

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* A kind of minstrel with peculiar privileges. Like the old-time Scottish Highlanders, who never went on foray without their piper, the Northmen always took their skald on an adventure oversea.

"And you will find the brassiest-faced Jews in Europe ready for you! They live in the narrow streets near-by and look to Simon to protect them with his influence. They'll swarm out with stones in their hands at the first bleat from Simon's slaves. But there's worse than they. The city is patrolled by armed slaves who belong to the municipium.* The place is ten times better policed than Rome, and there's a law against being out at night without being able to prove lawful business. It is no light task I set you. I think I had better leave you here and go myself."

"Tros, I tell you, I go! I will be safe enough in a Roman costume. They will take me for some gallant pursuing a love affair."

"In the Jews' quarter? I think not," said Tros. "A man may buy a Jewess in the open market almost anywhere where slaves are sold, but no man in his senses goes philandering near a ghetto after dark! The Jews can fight! And if you beat on Simon's door, his slaves will rush out and cudgel you."

"Conops shall beat the door," said Orwic. "While the slaves beat Conops, I will slip into the house."

"Cockerel! I wouldn't lose Conops for his weight in money!"

"Very well. I can wait until dawn outside the house and—"

"No. By morning Simon must have visited my ship. Now listen. Try to forget you are Caswallon's nephew and a prince of Britain. Only remember you are charged with secret business. If you try to show how smart you are, the gods will raise a wall of circumstance around you that will test your wits to the extremity. Go modestly, and they will modify the odds. Bear that in mind. Now, muck me this sand away—so. To the floor with it. Let that Jaun Spaniard clean it up. The rascal rots with laziness. Now, I will write the letter."

He spoke as one who contemplated making magic, and for a while, for the sake of exercising Orwic's patience, he sat listening to the murmur of the short waves overside. Then he wrote swiftly, using Greek, pausing line by line to read aloud and construe it to Orwic:

"Tros, the Samothracian, to Simon, son of Tobias, the Jew of Alexandria, in Gades, greeting.

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* The local government. Gades was not yet in fact a municipium. Local officials were appointed and removed at pleasure by the Roman governor.

"Be the bearer as a son to you. He is Orwic, son of Orwic, a prince of Britain, nephew to the king who rules the Trinobantes and the Cantii, my true friend. Speak him freely.

"Knowing I have done you service in the past, whereby we both made profit, and aware you are a man of true heart and long memory, whose zeal for great enterprises is in no wise dulled by the success that has attended many efforts in the past, I urge that you should come to me with all speed, secretly, to-night, for conference concerning matters that may profit both of us.

"Lord Orwic will attend you and convey you by the shortest way in safety to my ship.

"This is my true word. So fail not.

"Tros of Samothrace."

He sanded the letter and passed it to Orwic, who frowned at the thick Greek characters.

"Will he understand you need help? Why not tell him so?" Orwic objected.

"Because I know him!" Tros answered. "If he thought I needed help, he wouldn't come until he had driven a hard bargain first by daylight. But if he thinks there is a stroke of business I can put his way he will come in a hurry to learn the details of it."

"Better not tell him anything about your plans then?"

"Tell him all you know of them!" Tros answered drily and left the cabin to watch provisions being weighed out to the galley for the evening meal.

CHAPTER LXIX

VISITORS

Why are they servants, and I master? Not being God, I know not. But I am the master. This is my ship.

They, when they see a danger, fear it, whereas I fear only not to see it.

They, when they see a danger, magnify it and become a danger to themselves. They lend it their wits. I lend not mine to be used against me.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

THE minute the sun dipped below the skyline Tros ordered, "Out oars!" and, taking full advantage of the tide, dropped anchor in pitch darkness almost within hail of a spit of land that jutted into the mouth of Gades Bay. The moisture-laden Virazon, the sea-breeze that blows all night long between spring and autumn, had not yet broken the dead calm. There was a stench of rotting sea-weed from the shore, a croon of short waves on a sandy beach and, except that, silence.

There was no moon yet, but the starlight shone with milky whiteness that revealed the ghost-white city several miles away, rising tier on tier on a peninsula that was almost an island. About half a mile from where he had anchored a beacon-light flared in an iron basket, and in the distance, to the northward of the city, was a parallelogram of crimson fires that marked the outline of a Roman camp.

By lantern-light in the after deckhouse, with the ports well shrouded, Tros watched Conops get into the costume of a Greek slave.

"Now remember to act slavish!" he instructed. "Little man, much rests on you this night! To the Lord Orwic be fussily obsequious. See that he treads in no ordure near the gate. Watch that none touches him. Carry a stick to drive the dogs away from him, and use it at the least excuse. Talk Greek to him * no matter that he doesn't understand. To the gate custodians be insolent. If they ask your master's name and business, tell them they may have it and a whipping in the bargain to-morrow morning for their impudence. In a pinch use Simon's name, but not if you can help it, because if they learn that you are visiting Simon it might occur to them to extort a bribe from Simon by holding you both in the guardhouse until he comes."

"Trust me, master! I know Gades. There is a place outside the city wall where dancing girls are kept before they ship them for the Asia trade. Too bad we haven't scent of jasmine to make our clothes smell of an afternoon's adventure! Never mind. I'll manage it."

Then Orwic came, jingling a purse of gold and silver coins that Tros had given him, bending to admire the fashion of a Roman pallium and tunic, loot from Cæsar's bireme.

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* There was a large Greek colony in Gades, where the language was as much in use as any other at that time.

"Walk not like a horseman!" Tros protested. "A Roman noble walks with a stride that measures out the leagues. Come, try it on deck."

Tros strode for him. Orwic imitated. Conops ran in front, pretending to drive dogs away and pointing to guide his feet from pools of filth.

"Go. Go now with the gods in mind," said Tros and turned to give orders to Sigurdsen, who was to command the longboat.

"You, who were a king, so do, that if others had obeyed you formerly as you obey me now, you would be a king this day! Your weapons are for a last resort. Be silent, crafty, cunning, cautious—" he emphasized each word with his fist on the Northman's breast—"run rather than resist. If questioned, make no answer. Put one man ashore to follow the Lord Orwic and Conops as far as the city gate. Let him bring word to you when they have passed in. Come back to the ship with the information, taking care to keep the oars well muffled."

Then one last word to Orwic.

"Cover your long hair with your pallium. One gold-piece to the captain of the gate guard. One piece of silver to each of the others. No more, or you'll merely whet their appetites. Lud's luck!"

The muffled oar-beats thumped away into the dark, and silence fell. The whole crew was aware of mysteries impending. Aloft, the Northmen and some of the Eskualdenak leaned out of the rigging, watching the longboat until its shape was lost in the gloom. There began then a murmur of talking between decks, where the weary rowers sprawled. Jaun Aksue trespassed on the poop without asking permission and leaned over the rail beside Tros confidently, as if they two were equals.

"Secrecy!" he remarked grinning. "My men crave wine and shore leave. We have been eleven days at sea. The Gades girls are famous and the red wine is the best in all this land."

Tros suppressed his instinct to knock the man down. Friction might ruin the vague plan he had in mind.

"If you're caught in Gades, you'll be crucified," he answered.

"Maybe. But you have friends ashore, or you wouldn't be here," said Aksue. "You can give us shore leave. You can say we're your slaves. We'll act the part, then nobody can interfere with us. We needn't go into the city. There are taverns outside the wall and lots of women. Promise us a day ashore and some money to spend, and we'll keep as quiet as mice 'til morning. Otherwise, I won't answer for what my men will do."

Tros found it easy enough now to tolerate the impudence. That those proud Eskualdenak were willing to act the part of slaves solved more than half of the problem that had racked his brain for days and nights on end. He nodded.

"You shall go ashore."

"And money?"

"I will arrange it. Go and warn your men that if there's any noise to-night, no shore leave!"

For an hour he paced the poop anxiously. There might be Roman guard-ships on the prowl, and he had given hostages to fortune. He could not desert Orwic and Conops.

At the end of an hour he heard splashing, and thought it was dolphins or porpoises. Then, staring into the darkness, he was nearly sure he saw the outline of a boat.

"Sigurdsen!" he shouted. No answer. It was much too soon to expect Sigurdsen in the longboat.

But the splashing continued. Presently he saw two human heads within a few feet of the ship's side. A voice that he thought was a woman's cried out to him in Greek to throw a rope. He went himself and lowered the rope ladder, ordering the deck-watch to the other bulwark. A man and a woman climbed up like wet shadows and stood dripping in the dark in front of him. The woman wore nothing but a Greek chlamys, with the wreck of a wreath of flowers tangled in her wet hair; the man had on a Roman tunic, that clung and revealed a lithe, athletic figure. They were nearly of a size. In the dark they looked like children up to mischief.

"Tros!" said the woman. Tros nearly jumped out of his skin.

Had he been recognized before he even set foot in Gades?

Gesturing with a jerk of the head and arm, he led the way toward the cabin, where he might learn the worst without the deck-watch hearing it.

At the door he paused and let them pass in ahead of him. For a minute he stood, making sure that the deck-watch were not near enough for eavesdropping, wondering how many of them had seen the swimmers come aboard. When he entered the cabin the girl had already clothed herself in his own best purple cloak, that had been hanging on the rail between the bunk and the bulkhead.

"Tros!" she said. "Tros of Samothrace!" She laughed at him, seeming no worse for her swim, although the man was squatting on the floor and looked exhausted. She curtsied with a rhythm of bare legs. There was no fear in her eyes, nor even challenge, but a confidence expressed in laughter and a gesture of disarming comradeship.

"Lord Tros," she began again.

"I am not Tros," he answered sullenly.

Of all the difficulties in the world he dreaded most a complication with women.

"Oh, yes, you are!" she answered. "Horatius Verres saw your ship at sunset notched against the sky. He recognized it instantly. He was in hiding on the roof of Pkauchios' *ergastulum*.* He is a runaway from Gaul. I am Chloe, the dancer, Pkauchios' slave. I am the favorite of Gades," she added, as if she were not particularly proud of it but simply stating fact.

"What do you want?" Tros asked sullenly. That the girl's ivory-white skin shone golden in the whale-oil lantern light, and that her face was like a cameo against the shadow, only deepened his mistrust. He retired two paces from her and stood with his back against the door.

"Only what I can get!" she answered, and sat on Tros's bunk, arranging his pillows behind her, covering her bare knees with his blanket. "I could tell Balbus, the governor, who you are, but I won't if you will bargain fairly."

Tros glanced at the man on the floor, who was slapping his head to get the water from his ears.

"As prisoners—" he suggested.

Chloe interrupted, laughing.

"I am a slave who owns slaves. My women know where I am. I have two men-slaves waiting on the beach."

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* A private prison kept for the punishment of slaves.

"Who is this fellow?" Tros asked.

"I told you. Horatius Verres. He had a little difficulty with the Romans and had to run away from Gaul. If what he said is true, he lost his heart to a girl whom Cæsar coveted—some young matron, I suppose, or Cæsar wouldn't have looked twice at her. Some one, to earn Cæsar's favor, accused poor Horatius Verres of accepting bribes to give Cæsar an excuse to send him to Rome in fetters and keep the woman for himself. She found out the plot in time and warned him. So he slew the informer and tried to escape to Britain in one of four biremes that Cæsar was sending along with some Eskualdenak to invade that country.

"Somebody," she looked merrily at Tros—"attacked those biremes, destroyed three of them, and captured a lot of Eskualdenak. The fourth bireme escaped to Gaul with Horatius Verres still on board, but he swam away before they reached port and escaped a second time overland. He reached Gades in a dreadful state, but I could see he was a pretty boy under all the rags and whiskers, so I hid him and saved him from Balbus' labor gang, because he had told me his real name and an interesting story. I hid him on the roof of my master's *ergastulum*. Later, when he was rested, I sent him to Simon the Jew, thinking Simon might do something for him, because Simon owes me money and can't pay."

"Can't pay? You say Simon can't pay what he owes you?"

She nodded.

"You know Simon? He has lent all his money to Cæsar and Balbus."

"Go on," said Tros, his fingers clutching at his sword-hilt.

He could not have asked a greater favor from the gods than that Simon should be short of money at the moment; but he was afraid of this woman, and still more afraid lest she should realize it.

"Simon was shocked and virtuous," she continued. "He would have informed Balbus if I hadn't reminded him of a few little things I know about himself. He agreed to say nothing, but he was afraid to do anything, so Horatius Verres had to return to his hiding place. I was asleep this afternoon when he sighted your ship from the roof of the *ergastulum*, but he called to me through the window of my cottage in Pkauchios' garden and said he would be safe if he could reach your ship, so I came with him to help him pass the gate guards, and then came out here for the fun of it. I wanted to see Tros the Samothracian."

"And are you satisfied?" Tros asked her.

He knew the reputation of the Gades dancing girls—intrigue, well-educated villainy, greed, ulterior motives. He was sure that this one would not have dared to visit him unless convinced of her own safety. Perhaps she knew Orwic and Conops were ashore, and was counting on them as hostages to prevent her from being carried off to sea before daylight.

She looked at him long and steadily, then nodded with a little uplift of her Grecian nose and a droop of the eyelids that suggested confidence in her own skill to read character.

"Why did you come to Gades?" she asked. "Balbus, the governor, knows you are a pirate. I have heard him talk of it."

"I came to see Simon," Tros answered, and watched her to judge the effect.

By her face, by her manner, by the sudden, puzzled frown with a hint of speculation underlying it, he judged that she did not know about his having sent two messengers ashore. And her next words confirmed the guess.

"Simon has much less influence than my master Pkauchios, who is an astrologer whom all men fear. If you will hide Horatius Verres on your ship, I will speak for you to Pkauchios. He is almost the only man who dares to go to Balbus at any hour of the night. He would make Balbus afraid to interfere with you, by talking about the stars and portents and all that nonsense. Then, what do you want to do? You know—" she looked at him keenly and impudently —"you can buy me. I have much influence in Gades."

"How much are you worth?" Tros asked her.

"My value in the market? Two hundred thousand sesterces! * You don't believe it? Pkauchios had to pay the tax on that amount. He entered me on the list at much less, but the Roman who had farmed the taxes from Balbus ordered me sold at auction, so Pkauchios had to admit the higher value and pay a tax on the sale in the bargain. But I did not mean you should buy me. I meant you can buy my influence."

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* About eight thousand, five hundred dollars—a very high, but not an unheard-of price for a slave who could make enormous profits for her master.

But in a world full of uncertainties, if there was one thing sure, it was that buying dancing women's influence was as unthrifty a proceeding as to throw the money overboard. The only end of it would be the bottom of the thrower's purse. Tros stared at Horatius Verres.

"How did you obtain her influence?" he asked. "Did you pay for it?"

The man smiled and troubled himself to rise before he answered.

"Money?" he asked with a shrug of his shoulders. He had all the gestures of a well-bred man, and he was handsome in a dark way, although his eyes were rather close together. "I made love to her."

"I won't enslave you," said Tros, "but I won't trust you until I know you better."*

Verres bowed acknowledgement.

"I am grateful," he said, smiling again with a peculiar boyish up-twist of the mouth.

Tros was about to speak again, but the deck-watch shouted, and a man pounded the cabin door.

"Sigurdsen comes!"

Tros had to go on deck or else summon Sigurdsen into the cabin. He did not want the deck crew in his confidence. He signed to Chloe and Verres to hide themselves in the dark corner, where his clothes hung between bunk and bulkhead.

CHAPTER LXX

GADES BY NIGHT

Mastery? Its secret? Hah! Self-mastery! But few believe it; it is so simple that few attempt it. Many who attempt it fail because it is so simple. He who has it blames not failure on the disobedience of others, though he punish and reward. Reward and punishment are for the ignorant, who think that God, or the gods, or unknown powers send disaster. Self-mastery lets in intelligence to disobey the promptings of disaster. He who is master of himself, he is also master of events. Disaster shall serve his purpose, and why not? Disaster has neither brains nor heart nor understanding.

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* It would have been quite simple for Tros lawfully to enslave Verres. For instance, on arrival at some other port he could have presented a bill for passage money, and if Verres did not pay that, he could attach his person for debt.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

ORWIC jumped on to the seaweed-littered beach, slipped on a heap of the slimy stuff and sprawled among the scampering crabs, where Conops helped him to his feet.

"A bad omen, Lord Orwic. A bad omen!"

But the Britons were not addicted to the vice of reading omens in every accident.

"Go back in the boat, if you're afraid," he answered. So Conops started to lead the way on the five-mile walk toward the city across a dark, ill-smelling wilderness of sand and scrub where anything might happen. And Sigurdsen sent Skram, the skald, to follow them.

They found a road after a while, with a stinking ditch on either side of it, and before long saw the lights of the drinking booths, brothels and slaughter yards outside the wall, where there was neither day nor night but one long pandemonium of vice and lawlessness. And soon after that the first of the scavenger dogs, prowling in search of stray goats or forgotten offal, winded them and started a yelp that brought the pack.

Thereafter, they had to fight their way with knife and stick, not daring to gather stones lest the ferocious brutes should snatch that opportunity to rush them as they stooped. But the noise called no attention from the slums, where a dog-fight in the dark was nothing new, and when Skram, judging he was close enough to the gates, lay down to watch, the dogs devoted all their efforts to attacking him, leaving Orwic and Conops free to approach the gate with a semblance of Roman dignity. There Conops took command.

There was a foot-gate in the midst of one side of the double, iron-strapped wooden one that had been closed at sunset; and in the midst of the small gate was a grilled opening that the guard could look through, and above that a lantern on an iron bracket.

Long before they came into the lantern light Conops began talking fussily in Greek.

"This way, master! That way! Mind the muck here! Dionysus! But the wine those rascals sell has madness in it! Master, master, try to walk straight!" Any one who understood Greek could not help but know that a Roman gentleman was coming from an evening's entertainment.

"There, master, give me your purse and lean against that wall while I call the gate guard!"

Conops set his ugly face against the grill and whistled.

"Quick!" he commanded. "My master is drunk, and ill-tempered because he has been robbed."

"Who is he?" a voice asked through the grill.

"None of your business! Be quick, unless the lot of you want to be whipped in the morning!"

"Was he robbed of his purse?"

"Zeus! No. What do you take me for? I keep his purse."

"Well, you know what it costs. One gold-piece from each of you to the man on duty, and then the officer—he makes his own terms."

"Fool!" Conops roared at him. "Open! If you knew who waits you'd tremble in your mongrel skin!"

The guard vanished. A moment later Conops heard him reporting through the guard-house window to his officer, and he made haste to improve the passing moment.

"Master, master!" he yelled. "Don't beat me! I'm doing my best! Order those blackguards in the guard-house beaten for daring to keep you waiting. Ow! Ow! Master, that hurts!"

The captain of the guard came—a Numidian, as coal-black as the shadows, rolling the whites of his eyes in an effort to see through the grill, his breath reeking of garlic.

"Who?" he demanded.

"You'll pay smartly for it if I have to tell you!" Conops answered. "Hurry up now! Two gold-pieces for you to hold your tongue and shut your eyes. Some silver for your men. My master's drunk. I pity you, if you keep him waiting!"

A great key jangled on a ring. The lock squeaked. Conops threw his arm around Orwic, whose face was smothered in the fold of his pallium.

"Act very drunk!" he whispered, and hustled him through the narrow opening.

On the far side he pushed him into the darkest shadow, where dim rays from a lantern showed the broad blue border of a Roman tunic and the sandaled legs below it, but nothing else. There was a chink of money. The Numidian signed to half-a-dozen men to retire into the guard-house.

"Remind him when he's sober that I let him in without a fuss," he said, grinning. "Who is he?"

Conops laid a hand on the black man's shoulder and leaned toward him as if to whisper, then apparently thought better of it.

"No," he said, "mind your own business, That's wisest. I'll remind him you were civil."

"All right. Don't forget now! I'll remember you, you one-eyed Greek! If I see you and ask a favor some time—"

But Conops was gone, his left arm around Orwic and his right hand closed on something that, it seemed, he valued—possibly the purse. The captain of the gate guard may have thought so.

"Act drunk—drunk—drunker than that!" he whispered. "Strike a blow at me!"

It was too early for the streets to be deserted and the danger was of meeting Romans or some citizen who might imagine he recognized the drunken man and speak to him for the fun of it. But the street was crooked and the upper stories of the houses leaned out overhead until they almost met, creating a tunnel of gloom into which the yellow light of doors and windows streamed at intervals. The moment they were out of sight of the guard-house Conops advised a change of tactics.

"Now sober! Now walk swiftly, as if we had serious business. Stride, man! Stride out! Remember you're a Roman!"

But the spirit of adventure was in Orwic's veins. It was the first time he had seen a foreign city. Men who stood in doorways, house-fronts, litters of the wealthy merchants borne on the shoulders of slaves—all was new to him and stirred his curiosity. Above all, as they threaded through the maze of narrow streets, the glimpse through certain open doors attracted him. For Gades had not yet been zoned, as Rome was, more or less, and as Lunden did not need to be. There were cavernous, white-washed cellars visible from mid-street, in which women danced to the jingling strains of strings and castanets.

Naked-bellied women ran from one door, seizing Orwic, trying to drag him in to drink and witness Gadean indecency. One pulled away the pallium that hid the lower portion of his face and Conops struck at her too late; she glimpsed the long, fair hair that fell to the Briton's shoulders, screamed of it, tried to tug the pallium again.

"*Haie,* girls! A barbarian! A rich barbarian! Let's teach him."

The owner of the place came out, a bull-necked Syrian who tried to keep Conops at bay while the slave-women struggled to hustle their quarry down steps into the cellar whence the din of music and the reek of wine emerged. The scuffle drew attention from a guard of the municipium, street-corner lurking, watching for a chance to blackmail somebody. He came on the run and, wise in all the short cuts to extortion, picked on Conops as a slave worth money, worth redeeming from the lock-up.

Too quick for him, Conops stepped into the light that streamed from the cellar doorway, showed him something in the palm of a secretive hand. Whatever it was, the Syrian saw it, too, and drove the women down the cellar steps. The guard of the municipium strolled away, the Syrian grew laughingly apologetic. Conops led up-street in haste and around three corners before he paused and let Orwic come abreast.

"What did you show him?" Orwic asked.

"Oh, only a bronze badge I stole from that fool Numidian at the gate."

They reached the wide street running crosswise of the city—wide, that was, for Gades, where there was no wheeled traffic because of the house-fronts that jutted out promiscuously and the arches and bottle-necked passages—passed a temple of Venus, rawly new, of imported Sicilian marble, where Orwic's British eyes stared scandalized at the enormous figure of the naked goddess colored in flesh tints and bathed in the flickering light of torches, and turned due eastward, up an alley between high, blind walls where the air smelt stale and filthy and there was not room for two men to pass without squeezing.

There, in the stinking dark, men slept who had to be stepped over carefully. Some swore when awakened and followed with drawn knives, so that Conops walked backward, his own long knife-blade tapping on the wall to give the night-pads warning he was armed.

And there were high doors in the walls, set in dark and unexpected corners, where men lurked who stepped out suddenly and blocked the way, demanding an alms with no humility. Conops slipped under Orwic's arm and trounced one of them with the handle of his knife, whereafter Orwic called for consultation.

"Tros recommended caution," he remarked. "We can not fight all the thieves in Gades. Yet if we fee one rascal he will call his gang to murder us for the purse. We should be better off in the cellar where the women were; they might have taken our money without killing us, or so it seems to me. Pick me up that rascal. Has he breath left? Can he speak? So. Offer him silver to lead us to the house of Simon and keep other rogues at bay."

So, for a while they went preceded by a man in rags who announced in low growls to fellow-prowlers of the Gades underworld that these were privileged night-passengers who had paid their footing, and none offered to molest them after that, except one leper, who demanded to be paid to keep his filthy sores at a distance. He was of the aristocracy of beggardom and bound by no guild restrictions.

And so into the ghetto, where another sort of night-life teemed in crowded alleyways. Iron-barred windows and a reek of pickled fish; sharp voices raised in argument; song, pitched in minor melancholy with an undertone of triumph; secrecy suggested by the eye-holed shutters; ugliness; no open doors, yet doors that did open secretively as soon as they had passed, to afford a glimpse of the unwelcome strangers.

At the end of a few turns the beggar-guide professed to have lost himself, demanded his money and decamped. Orwic remembered the plan Tros drew in sand on the cabin table, but could not see that it faintly resembled any of these winding alleys. Conops, sailor by profession, had the bearings in his head, but could make nothing of the maze confronting them.

"Let us return to the temple of Venus and start again," he suggested. "There used to be an alley that ran nearly straight from there to Simon's house."

But Orwic plunged forward at random toward a corner where a dim lamp burned in an iron bracket. Conops warned him they were followed and struck the blade of his long knife against a door-post, but Orwic turned and stuck his foot into a door that had opened just sufficiently to give a view of him. Conops, who knew Gades ghetto's reputation, tried to pull him back:

"Caution!" he urged.

But Orwic was already inside. There was a leather screen, and Conops could not see him. He had to follow, and the door slammed at his back. The screen masked the end of a short, narrow passage that turned into a room, where there were voices and a dim light. Conops used up a few seconds lunging in the darkness with his knife to find out who and where the man was who had slammed the door. Then he groped for the door, but failed to find the lock, his fingers running up and down smooth wood. He could hardly even find the crack between door and frame.

"Oimoi! Olola! Tros was mad to send a Briton!"

Some one chuckled in the darkness. He lunged with his knife at the sound, but hit nothing, then decided to try the passage and the voices and the light. But first he knocked the screen down, being a Greek strategist. A clear line of retreat, even toward a locked door, seemed better than nothing.

He found Orwic in a room whose walls were higher than its length or breadth. Somewhere in the darkness overhead there was a gallery that creaked, suggesting people up there listening, but the one dim light was below the gallery, its flickering light thrown downward by a battered bronze reflector. There was a smell of oil, spice, leather and tallow, but nothing in the room except a leather-covered table and two stools. Orwic leaned against the table. An old Jew sat facing him on one of the stools, his knees under the table and his back against the wall. The Jew wore the robes of his race and a dirty cloth cap, beneath which the oily ringlets coiled on either side of bright black eyes. He was scratching his curled beard as he contemplated Orwic.

"Simon!" said Orwic. "Simon! Simon!"

The Jew glanced at Conops, who stood sidewise in the door, tapping his knife against the post and swaying himself to see into the shadows.

"Is he drunk?" he asked, speaking Greek. "My name isn't Simon."

"Simon, son of Tobias of Alexandria," said Conops. "Where is his house? We seek him."

"Every one in Gades knows the house of Simon, son of Tobias of Alexandria," the old Jew answered. "Why do you break into my house?"

Conops showed him the bronze badge, stolen from the captain of the gate guard, but that had no effect whatever.

"Such a thing will get you into trouble," said the Jew. "You have no right to it. That belongs to a captain of the slaves of the municipium."

Conops began to be thoroughly frightened. The stealthy sounds in gallery and passage and the confident curiosity of the old Jew assured him he was in a tight place.

"Master, let's go!" he urged in Gaulish.

But Orwic could see no danger, and the Jew smiled, his lower lip protruding as he laid a lean hand on the table.

"A Gaul? Ah! And a Greek slave? Who is your master?" he asked Conops. "What does he want with Simon ben Tobias of Alexandria? What is a Gaul doing with a Greek slave? You must tell me. Come and stand here."

He pointed to the floor beside him. Conops obeyed, knife in hand, well satisfied to stand where he could hold the old Jew at his mercy at the first suggestion of attack.

"Put your knife away. Slaves are not allowed to carry weapons," said the Jew, and again Conops obeyed. He could redraw the knife in a second. "Who is your master? Why did you come to my house?"

Orwic seemed perfectly undisturbed, although he kept on sniffing at the strange smells.

"Tell him to show us the way to Simon's house," he said patiently.

"You would never be admitted into Simon's house at this hour," said the Jew. "There are always his slaves in the street, and they protect his house unless they know you. Do they know you?"

"Tell him," said Orwic, "that we have a letter for Simon."

But the Jew seemed to understand the Gaulish perfectly.

"Show me!" he remarked, and held his hand out.

"Don't you, master! Don't you!" Conops urged, but Orwic did not understand the Greek. He had supposed the Jew demanded money to show the way.

The Jew's eyes gleamed in the direction of the door. Conops turned instantly. There were three Jews in the passage—confident, young, strong, armed with heavy leather porter's straps, which was a weapon quite as deadly as a knife. They leaned with their backs against the passage wall and gazed through into the room with insolent amusement.

"Simon is my friend," said the Jew. "If it is true you have a letter, I will take it to him. You wait here. But I don't believe you have a letter. You are robbers. Who should send strangers with a letter to Simon at this hour of night?"

Conops explained that to Orwic.

"Tell him he may come with us and satisfy himself," said Orwic, beginning to be piqued at last.

"Which of you has the letter?" the old Jew demanded, and the three young Jews in the passage-way advanced into the room, as if they had been signaled.

"I can kill all three of those!" said Conops grimly.

His hand went like lightning to his knife-hilt, but a woman screamed in the gallery and smashed something. Conops and Orwic glanced up, and in the same second each found himself caught in a rawhide noose, arms pinioned.

They fought like roped catamounts with teeth and feet, but the three young Jews were joined by others, who helped to kneel on them and tie them until they could not move, the old Jew sitting all the while, his back against the wall, as if the whole proceeding were quite usual and did not interest him much.

He said something in a sharp voice, and the men began to search their prisoners.

One of them tossed the purse on to the table. Orwic's short Roman sword followed, then Conops' knife and the bronze badge taken from the gate guard. At last the letter was discovered, tucked under the belt of Orwic's tunic. The old Jew read it, knitting his brows, sitting sidewise so as to hold it toward the light, his lean lips moving as he spelled the words.

"Eh? Tros of Samothrace! Eh?"

He rolled up the letter and thrust it in the bosom of his robe, then spoke rapidly in Aramaic to the Jews who were squatting beside their prisoners. Presently he opened the purse on the table, counted the money, threw it down, called to the woman, who tossed down a cloak from the gallery, and left the house, shuffling along the passage-way in slippers.

CHAPTER LXXI

CHLOE—"QUI SALTAVIT PLACUIT"

For my own sake I give my slaves freedom. Obedience from a free man is not an insult to my manhood. If I punish free men for disobedience and evil manners I offend not my own soul. As for other men's slaves, I judge their owners by the slaves' behavior.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

TROS and Sigurdsen stood over by the water clocks, the full width of the ship from where Chloe and Horatius Verres sat in hiding. But Sigurdsen's voice was a sailor's and, the Gaulish being foreign to him, he spoke it with peculiar emphasis.

"Skram was badly bitten by the dogs," said Sigurdsen. "He saw both men enter the city, and he is afraid now he will go mad from dog-bite. The other men think Skram will bite them. They talk of killing him for a precaution."

Tros groped in a corner.

"Take this," he commanded. "Tell Skram and all those other fools that the druids gave it to me. It'll sting, mind. You'll have to hold him while you rub it on. Tell Skram that if he drinks nothing but water, and eats no meat for three days, he'll recover and the dogs'll die. Tell him I said that. Then put Skram to bed, choose another in his place, and row back to the shore and wait for Orwic, Conops and the man they'll bring with them."

Sigurdsen departed and presently Skram's yells announced the application of the pine-oil dressing to sundry tender parts of his anatomy. Being a skald, he had a strong voice trained to out-yell storms and drunken roistering.

Chloe came out of the dark into the whale-oil lantern light.

"You have sent men ashore?" she asked. "To get in touch with Simon? At this hour of the night? They'll fail! They'll be caught by Balbus' city guards, or be killed by the Jews." She thought a minute. "Better have sent me! Were they slaves?"

"They are friends," Tros answered. "Where did you learn Gaulish?"

She laughed.

"Pkauchios sent me to Gaul one time to dance for Cæsar."

"Why did Pkauchios send you to Cæsar?"

"Pkauchios' business is to know men's secrets. But I failed that time. Cæsar is no fool."

She sat on the bunk again, covering her bare knees with a blanket, and for an hour Tros talked to her, he pacing up and down the cabin floor and she regaling him with all politics of Gades.

"Balbus bleeds the place," she told him. "Balbus pretends to be Cæsar's friend, but he is the nominee of Pompey the Great, who has all Hispania for his province but stays in Rome and has men like Balbus send him all the money they can squeeze out of their governorships, not that a good percentage doesn't stick to Balbus' fingers. Balbus intends to rebuild the city. If those men you sent ashore get caught by the city guard, they'll find themselves in the quarries sometime to-morrow. Balbus has forbidden the export of male slaves, because he wants to glut the market, so as to buy them cheap for his labor gangs. He sentences all able-bodied vagrants to the quarries. He will crucify you, though, if he catches you, unless—"

"Are there any Roman warships in the harbor?" Tros asked her.

"Only one guard-ship, a trireme, but it's hauled out for repairs. The spring fleet hasn't come yet, and the fleet that wintered here has gone to Gaul with supplies and recruits for Cæsar's army."

"When is the spring fleet expected?"

"Any day. It's overdue. The spring fleet comes with the merchant-ships to protect them from the pirates. They say the pirates are getting just as bad as they were before Pompey the Great made war on them; and they say, too, that Pompey is too lazy to go after them again, or else afraid that Cæsar's friends might take advantage of his absence. You know, Pompey and Cæsar pretend to be great friends, but they're really deadly enemies, and now that Crassus, the richest man in the world, has gone to Syria, people are saying it's only a matter of time before Cæsar and Pompey are at each other's throats. Until now they've both been afraid of Crassus' money bags, which seems silly to me. The winner could kill Crassus—"

"And which side does Balbus take?"

The girl laughed.

"Balbus takes his own side, just like all the rest of us. *Balbus aedificabit.*[*] He hopes to win fame by making Gades a great city. If Cæsar should win in the struggle that everybody knows is coming, well—Balbus is Cæsar's friend. If Pompey wins, Balbus is Pompey's nominee and very faithful to him."

"What about you?" Tros asked her.

"What do I matter? I am a dancing girl, a slave—the property of Pkauchios the Egyptian."

"Which way lie your sympathies?" Tros insisted.

"With me, of course, with Chloe. But Balbus loves me, if that is what you mean. He would buy me, if I weren't so terribly expensive. And he would find some way of freeing me from Pkauchios, if Pkauchios weren't so useful to him."

"How?"

"Pkauchios reads the stars, and prophesies. Quite a lot of what he says comes true."

"Sorcery, eh?"

"Call it that if you like. Pkauchios owns other dancing girls besides me. We are all of us rather well trained at picking up information."

"You say you know Cæsar. You like him?"

"Who could help it? He's handsome, intelligent—oh, how I hate fools!—he has manners, fascination, courtesy. He can be cruel, he can be magnanimous, he thrills you with his presence, he's extravagant—as reckless as a god with his rewards. Oh, he's wonderful! There isn't any meanness in him, and when he looks at you, you simply feel his power. You can't help answering his questions. And then he just looks away—like this."

Chloe broke into a song that had become current wherever women followed in the wake of Roman arms:

If my love loves not me,
May a bear from the mountains hug him.

"So now you love Balbus instead?" Tros suggested.

"Bah! Thirty thousand Balbuses are not worth half of Cæsar! I said, Balbus loves *me*. But he is too mean to buy me. What are two hundred thousand sesterces to a man who can tax all Gades and sell judgments and confiscate traitors' property? I myself own more than two hundred thousand sesterces."

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[*] Balbus intends to build.

"Then why don't you buy your own freedom?"

"Two good reasons. One is, that I placed my peculium * in Simon, the Jew's hands, out of the reach of Pkauchios. And Simon can't repay me at the moment, though he's honest in money matters like most of the rich Jews. The other is, that if I buy my freedom, I should still be Pkauchios' client. I couldn't leave Gades without his permission."

"And—?"

Tros felt himself on the scent of something. He experienced that strange thrill, unexplainable, that precedes a discovery. He shot questions at random.

"Why didn't you deposit your money with the temple priests, as most slaves do?"

"Because the priests hate Pkauchios. They would rob me to spite him. Simon is more honest."

Possibly she felt in Tros something like that same compelling force that she said had made her answer Cæsar's questions. After a moment's pause she answered:

"I didn't want my freedom until—" she glanced at the dark corner where Horatius Verres sat in silence—"you see, I have more liberty without it. As a slave, there are few things I can't do in Gades."

"But—?" Tros insisted.

She shuddered.

"Roman law! If my master should be charged with treason they would have to take my evidence under torture. No escape from that. A slave's evidence against her master mayn't be taken any other way. Some of them die under torture. None of them are much good afterwards. They're always lame, and the fire leaves scars."

Tros whistled softly to himself, pacing the cabin floor, his hands behind him. Suddenly he turned on her.

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* The private fortune of a slave. Many masters encouraged slaves to purchase their own freedom, since then the master received a high price and retained a valuable "client" who was still bound to him by various restrictions.

"You didn't come here just for Horatius Verres' sake! You didn't cross that marshland in the dark for the fun of a swim to a pirate's ship! You called me a pirate just now. You had Verres' word for that. Whose else?"

"Cæsar wrote to Balbus to be on the watch for you. I saw the letter. It came by the overland mail three weeks ago."

"You a slave, and you risk yourself on a pirate's ship?"

"Well, I thought I would make friends with you."

"Why?"

"Because if Pkauchios gets into difficulties, I might be able to escape to somewhere. Almost anywhere would do."

Tros, pacing the floor again, turned that over in his mind, reflecting that if she was willing to risk herself in what she supposed were a pirate's hands, she must be in serious danger of the Roman tortures. Pkauchios, her master, must be well into the toils. However, he was not quite sure yet that she was telling the truth.

"You say Balbus loves you and would torture you?" he asked. "He is the governor, isn't he? He can overrule the court. He would find some excuse—"

"Bah!" she interrupted. "Balbus would enjoy it! You should see him at the circus. He isn't satisfied unless a dozen horses break their legs under the chariot wheels. See him at the spectacles. He likes the agony prolonged. A month ago he had a woman scourged and then worried by dogs, but he gave her a stick to defend herself and it took the brutes an hour to kill her. Balbus pretends he does it for the people's sake, but he makes them sick. It is he who likes it!"

Tros grinned pleasantly. The girl was trembling, trying to conceal it. He perceived he might make use of her, but fear, and the more of it the better, though a safe spur, would not provide against her treachery. He must supply hope, practical and definite. However, first another question, to make sure he was not wasting time and wit:

"So, after all, you have no real influence with Balbus?"

"That I have! I say, he loves me! I whisper, and he favors this or that one. But he would get just as much pleasure out of seeing me tortured as he does out of hiring me from Pkauchios to dance before his guests. He would say to the world, 'See how just I am. Behold my impartiality. I torture even Chloe, *qui saltavit, placuit.'* * Then he would enjoy my writhings! He would enjoy them all the more because he loves me."

Tros stood staring at her, arms akimbo.

"Do you think, at a word from you, Balbus would admit me into Gades?" he asked.

"That would come better from Pkauchios. Pkauchios can go to him any hour and say he has read portents in the stars," she answered.

"Can you manage Pkauchios?"

She frowned, then nodded.

"Yes. But he is dangerous. He will try to put you to his own use." Suddenly she laughed. "Let Pkauchios go to Balbus and prophesy that Tros the Samothracian will enter the harbor at dawn in his great red ship. It is red, isn't it? So Cæsar's letter said."

"Vermilion, with purple sails!" Tros answered proudly.

"And let Pkauchios say to Balbus that Tros of Samothrace is destined to render him a very great service. At dawn, the first prophecy will come true. So Balbus will believe the second and will receive you eagerly."

Tros nodded. He well knew the Romans' superstitious reverence for signs and omens. But he also knew the notorious treachery of the dancing girls of Gades.

"Do you care for pearls?" he asked her.

She gasped as he took a big one from the pocket in his belt and placed it on the palm of her extended hand.

"You shall have enough of those," he said, "to make a necklace."

"But a slave mayn't wear them." †

"You shall buy your freedom from your master."

"But Simon can't give me my money!"

"If all plans fail, you shall escape with me on my ship—you and Horatius Verres."

"If?" she said, watching him, weighing the pearl in the palm of her hand.

"If you give to me in full, meanwhile, your influence in Gades!

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* 'Who danced and pleased.' These famous words were a motto on a Roman dancer's tombstone.

† The Roman law was very strict as to who might wear pearls.

If you work for me ten times as faithfully as you have ever served your master! If you fail me in nothing, and lend me all your wit and all your knowledge."

"A bargain!" she exclaimed and held the pearl between her lips a moment. Then, suddenly, "Show me the rest of them! How many pearls?"

"You shall have them at the right time. Their number will depend on you." Tros stepped to the door. He heard the oar-thumps of the longboat. "How will you go back?"

"I will swim."

He shook his head. "I will send you ashore. Say nothing to the men. But how will you reach the city? There will be no Horatius Verres this time to fight the dogs off and protect you."

"I told you I am a slave who owns slaves. I have two men waiting for me on the beach."

Tros heard the deck-watch challenge and Sigurdsen's answering howl from close at hand.

"There is time yet," he said, glancing at the water clock. "Hide there." He pointed to the dark corner where Horatius Verres sat. "If this is Simon coming, don't let him see you. Slip out when he enters the cabin and I will order my boatmen to row you to the beach."

Then he peered at Verres. He could hardly see his outline in the shadow under the row of clothing.

"You," he said, "stay where you are, and don't let me hear a sound from you!"

CHAPTER LXXII

HEROD BEN MORDECAI

They think they know a thing because they have a familiar word for it. If I say avarice, they think of a craving to have. But do they know the subtle treachery of avarice? It is incapable of honor. But who knows it? Not the avaricious!

Am I over-sudden? Should I threaten? A threat is the snarl of cowardice. A fair warning is no threat, but is treachery entitled to a warning?

A fair warning is an appeal to wisdom, as when the clouds warn mariners to furl their sails. Threats are the lies of a coward masking treachery. I smite hard where the threat squeaks. Let the blow be a warning to liars to mend their manners.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

TROS went to the deck and peered over the bulwark into darkness. There was a half-moon now, but the ship's shadow covered the longboat and he could only vaguely see the shapes of four men sitting in the stern, one of whom was hugely fat, unquestionably Simon.

Sigurdsen climbed to the deck and grumbled, using Norse oaths:

"Helpless! Weighs like six men! Have to hoist him!"

"Orwic? Conops?"

"Haven't seen them. Fat man rode horseback to the beach. Asked for you. Others are his servants."

Sigurdsen ordered a rope rove through a block on the after yard-arm and a bight put in the end of it. Tros leaned overside.

"Simon!" he called. "Simon ben Tobias?"

A hoarse voice answered. Question and answer followed in a mixture of three languages, but Tros could hardly hear what Simon said.

"Ho there!" he exploded. "Put a parceling on that rope? Will you cut good Simon's rump in halves? Now steady. That's a nobleman of Gades, not a sack of corn!"

They walked the grunting weight up to the bulwark rail and swung him inboard, where Tros received him in strong arms.

"Simon, salaam! Salaam aleikum. Marhaba fik!"

"Peace? Blessing? There is none in Gades!" Simon answered, wheezing with fatness and asthma. "Curses on this night air. There is death in it! Tros, Tros, I can not pay the debt I owe you!"

Tros hurried him into the cabin, a slave, who had clambered up the ship's side, fussily arranging shawls around the old Jew's shoulders. A second slave helped a lean man up over the bulwark, who followed in uninvited.

"Door—door—shut the door!" Simon gasped in Greek, the language he had grown more used to than his native tongue.

The two slaves slammed it and remained outside. Tros helped Simon into a chair beside the table and then turned to face the second man, an old Jew in a cloak and a dirty cloth cap, beneath which long black ringlets curled beside his eyes.

"Who is this?"

Simon, coughing apologetically, answered—

"Herod ben Mordecai."

It might have been the cough, but it appeared to Tros he did not like the name.

"A friend?"

Simon did not answer—only coughed again, his tongue between his teeth.

Herod ben Mordecai smiled, his lower lip protruding as he thrust his head and shoulders forward to peer into Tros's face.

"Let us hope we are three friends!" he said significantly. "Shall I sit on that chair or on this one?"

He began to peer about the cabin, his bright eyes appraising everything. Tros sat down on his own oak chair with his back to the stern of the ship and Simon on his right. Herod ben Mordecai helped himself to the third chair, facing Simon, with his back toward the corner in which Chloe and Horatius Verres crouched in hiding.

"Where are the Lord Orwic and the man I sent with him?" Tros asked, looking straight at Simon.

Simon's face, majestic, heavy-browed and framed in a patriarchal beard, but sallow now from ill-health, wrinkled into a worried frown. Old before his time and physically weak from being too much waited on, he looked too strong-willed to yield to death and yet unable to enjoy the life he clung to. His clothes were wholly oriental, of embroidered camel hair, and there were far too many of them, making him look even fatter than he was. An eastern head-dress, bound on with a jeweled forehead band, concealed his baldness and increased his dignity; and he wore heavily jeweled rings on three of the fingers of each of his fat hands. He had kicked off his sandals when he entered and his fat feet, stockinged in white wool, were tucked up under him and hidden by the bulge of his prodigious stomach.

"I haven't seen them!" he said hoarsely.

"Then how did you get my letter?" Tros asked.

"Herod ben Mordecai brought it."

Tros stared at Herod. The old Jew's brilliant eyes met his without a quiver.

"How did you obtain my letter?" he demanded.

"My friend," Herod answered in an unexpectedly firm, businesslike voice, "you are lucky it fell into my hands. I took it straight to Simon, who keeps his house like a castle. There are not so many who could get to Simon at such an hour and, believe me or not, there are fewer who would not have gone straight to the Romans with the news that Tros of Samothrace is so near Gades!"

"I asked you, how did you get the letter?" Tros insisted.

"I heard you. I didn't answer," said the Jew.

"Very well," said Tros, "you are my prisoner!"

He made no move. He simply kicked his scabbard to throw the sword-hilt forward, and sat still. The Jew looked keenly at him, thrusting out his lower lip again, and for a minute there was silence, only disturbed by Simon's heavy breathing. Then Herod leaned across the table toward Tros, thrusting forward one hand, fingers twitching.

"You should make a friend of me," he said excitedly, "for Simon's sake. Let Simon tell it."

Herod resettled himself, twitching at his curled black beard and showing yellow teeth. Simon sighed heavily.

"Tros!" he gasped suddenly. "Herod knows too much!"

"What a prisoner knows won't sink the ship!" Tros answered.

Herod leaned forward again, elbows on the table, lower lip protruding, eyes as hard and glittering as jet.

"But it will ruin Simon," he retorted in a level voice.

Simon blurted out the facts, a list of them, while Herod tapped a finger on the table as if keeping check.

"I am in debt. Caius Julius Cæsar owes me three million sesterces, and won't pay. Balbus owes me a million, and I daren't ask him for it. If a word gets out in Gades against my credit, there will be a run on me. I lent my warehouse to conspirators for—"

Tros whistled softly.

"Which faction now?" he asked.

"Oi-yoi! Gades is full of factions!" Herod remarked, rubbing his hands as if washing them. He seemed amused.

"—for the storage of weapons," Simon went on. "They paid well. I needed—I need money. I didn't know those bales of merchandise were weapons until Herod spied on me and came and told me. Now, if Balbus learns of it, he will jump at the chance to seize my goods. He will tear up his own promises to pay. Cæsar's too for the sake of Cæsar's favor—and crucify me!"

"On a great—big—tree!" said Herod, laying both hands on his knees and smiling cruelly. "You would better tell Simon why you sent for him and make your proposal, whatever it is, and let us all three consider it. I am a man of business. Offer me business or my young men will be at Balbus' door at dawn. Before he has bathed himself he will have sent his guards to Simon's warehouse, where they will find the weapons in bales and bags and barrels. Then a thousand slaves that Simon owns and his great house full of curios and his daughters' children—how many, Simon? How many daughters' children?—will all be sold. And Simon, well—he may escape on this ship. I don't know. But the two who went ashore to-night will remain in Gades, where they will suffer such tortures as only Balbus can imagine—rack, fire, spikes under the nails—"

"Tros!" Simon exclaimed wheezily, his nervousness increasing the effect of asthma. "We are old friends! You will not—"

"None knows what I won't do!" Tros interrupted, thumping his great fist down on the table. "My young friend Orwic and my servant Conops went ashore. If a hair of a head of either one is injured, this man"—he scowled and showed his teeth at Herod—"dies!"

"What if I don't know where they are?" said Herod, shrugging his shoulders impudently.

"So much the worse for you!"

"You heard me. Balbus will ruin Simon!" Herod insisted, thrusting out his lower lip again.

"We will cross the bridge of Simon when we reach it," Tros said grimly.

Herod showed anxiety at last. His eyes admitted he had overstepped his reach, grew shifty, glanced from one man to the other, rested at last on Tros's angry face.

"You're a fine friend, to talk of letting your friend Simon be sold up and crucified just for the sake of a Gaul and a Greek slave! Mind you, I can't stop it, not unless I go ashore. My young men know I went to Simon's house. They don't trust him—nah, nah! They don't trust him. They know what to do! Any of Simon's slaves might murder me, mightn't they? Any time. Dead men can't talk. So you see, if I don't return pretty soon from Simon's house, my young men will go straight to Balbus. I tell you, I can't stop it unless—"

"I'll drown you unless my men return!" Tros interrupted. "You may send a messenger ashore—"

"I'll go!" said Chloe's voice, and even Tros was startled. Simon nearly screamed.

She stepped out from the dark and Simon stared uncomfortably at her, looked like a man caught naked in the bath for all that he wore so many clothes and she so few. Herod ben Mordecai recovered from surprise and found speech first. He became all oily smiles, a mass of them, his very body writhed itself into a smile, and his lower lip grew pendulous like an elephant's.

"Ah, pretty Chloe! Clever Chloe! Who'd have thought of finding Chloe on the ship of Tros of Samothrace! Chloe and I are old friends, aren't we! Often I hired Chloe before she got so famous and so expensive. Many a stroke of business Chloe had a hand in, eh, Chloe? *Yeh-yeh*. Chloe could tell who taught her how to turn a pretty profit now and then, eh, Chloe? Friendship, eh!"

He chuckled, as if remembering old mischief she and he had shared in, dug her in the ribs with his long forefinger, caught the edge of her damp chlamys, trying to pull her closer to him. She broke away, approached Simon from behind and stroked his forehead with her cool hands.

"Poor Simon!" she said merrily. "And he owes me two hundred thousand sesterces! Am I to lose it, Simon? And you so old! You'll never have time to grow rich again before you die, unless we help you! How shall we do it?"

Tros seemed to know. He reached for pen and ink and set them down in front of Herod. Then he clipped a scrap of parchment from a roll.

"Write!" he commanded. "To the people you refer to as your young men. Bid them release to Chloe, the slave of Pkauchios, my two men from whom you took that letter. Add that secret business will detain you. They are not to be troubled on your account. They are not to go to Balbus."

Herod ben Mordecai shrugged up his shoulders almost to his ears, then shook his head.

"I won't!" he said. "Sometimes letters get into the wrong hands. And besides, I can't—I can't write."

Chloe chuckled. Tros reached into a locker behind his chair, chose a long knife, stuck it point first in the table, bent it back toward him and released it suddenly.

"You have until that stops quivering!" he remarked.

Herod began to write with great facility, using Aramaic characters. He covered both sides of the scrap of parchment and then signed his name. Tros scrutinized the writing carefully, then handed it to Simon for a second censorship before intrusting it to Chloe.

"There, you see, there. I have done exactly what you say," said Herod. "I was only bargaining. We all have our own way of bargaining. You had the better of it. Now let's be friendly. I wouldn't have hurt Simon for—"

He wilted into silence under Tros's stare. He looked puzzled—seemed to wonder what mistake he might have made in judging character. Tros turned to Chloe.

"Understand me now, my two friends first! Go bring them here."

"Too late!" said Chloe. "I will have to hide them. Remember, I must go to Pkauchios and send him hurrying to Balbus with a reading of the stars!"

Tros nodded, chose a pearl out of the pocket in his belt, held it for a moment between thumb and finger in the lantern light, and tucked it away again. None but he and Chloe was aware of that sideplay.

"I want an interview with Balbus. Do you think your master could persuade him to come to my ship?"

Chloe shook her head violently.

"There have been too many plots against his life of late," she answered. "In some ways he is careless, in others he is like an old fox for caution. If you were an informer, if you had some tale to tell him about new conspiracies—"

Tros grinned. She had touched his genius. His hero was the great Odysseus. He knew the Odyssey by heart. He could make up a tale on the spur of a moment to meet almost any contingency.

"Tell Balbus I bring him opportunity to be a greater man than Cæsar!" he said confidently. "Bid your master tell Balbus to trust me, that he may stand in Cæsar's shoes."

She smiled, stared, smiled at him, her eyes astonished.

"Are you a seer?" she asked. "Those lion's eyes of yours—I—I—"

"Go do my bidding!"

He had aroused her superstition. If superstition might assist the pearls to bind her in his service, he could play that game as well as any man.

He rose from his chair and took Herod ben Mordecai by the neck. The Jew clutched at his wrists and tried to struggle. Tros shook the senses nearly out of him and dragged him out on deck, where he called a Northman.

"Fasten this man in an empty water-cask." Then suddenly he thought of Horatius Verres and turned to Chloe. "Fetch your Roman."

She led out Horatius Verres by the hand. They looked like handsome children in the darkness.

"Verres," said Tros, "you may earn my favor. Go below. Stand guard over this Jew. See he doesn't escape from the cask and that none has word with him."

There was a smile on Verres' face as he followed the Northman. The fellow had the Roman military habit of obedience without remark. Tros decided he liked him. He turned to Sigurdsen.

"Put this woman ashore. Nay," he said, taking his cloak from her, "that stays here! You may have a blanket." He returned to the cabin, took a blanket from his bunk and threw it over her. "Now, I will be in Gades harbor with the morning tide, ready for action. If Balbus is friendly, be you on the beach. If you are not there, I will send a threat to Balbus that unless the Lord Orwic and my man Conops are on board by noon, unharmed, I will burn all Roman shipping. I make no threats that I will not fulfil. For you, in that case, there will be no pearls, no freedom, no Horatius Verres, for I will sail away with him! So use brains and be swift."

Chloe went overside like a trained athlete, hardly touching the rope-ladder that Sigurdsen hung carefully in place. Tros watched the boat until it vanished in gloom at the edge of the path of moonlight, then returned to Simon in the cabin.

"Simon, old friend," he said, sitting down beside him, "in the fires of friendship men learn what they are and are not. I have learned this night that you are not so rich as I believed, nor yet so bold as you pretended. No, nor yet so wise as your repute. Tell me more of this Herod ben Mordecai."

Simon drooped his massive head in the humility of an oriental who acknowledges the justice of rebuke, and was silent for as long as sixty labored breaths. Then, wheezing, he revealed the sharp horns of his own dilemma.

"Tros, that Herod is a professional informer. Now he acts spy for the tax-gatherers, now he betrays a conspiracy, now he plays pander to Balbus. Now he buys debts and enforces payment. Now he lays charges of treason, so that he may buy men's confiscated valuables at the price of trash. And he has found out what is true—that there are weapons in my warehouse!"

Tros thought for a minute, drumming with his fingers on the table.

"Simon," he said at last, "you are not such a fool as to have let that happen without your knowledge."

In silence Simon let the accusation go for granted. He stared at the table, avoiding Tros's eyes.

"Tros," he said presently, hoarsely, "I am a Jew. I am not like these Romans who open their veins or stab themselves when their sins have found them out. Yet mine have found out me. I let myself be called the friend of Pkauchios, that cursed, black-souled dog of an Egyptian, a sorcerer! *Hey-yeh-yarrh!* It is the fault of all my race that we forever trust the magicians! We forsake the God of our forefathers. Too late, we find ourselves forsaken. *Adonai!* I am undone!"

"But I not!" Tros retorted. "I am not a Jew, so your god has no quarrel with me. Tell me more concerning Pkauchios."

"He has a hold on Balbus, through his sorceries. He knows that Balbus owes me a million sesterces. He knows I need the money. He knows Balbus would like to indict me for something or other in order to confiscate my wealth, such as it is—such as it is. I have a thousand slaves I can't sell, some millions I can't collect! Pkauchios plans an insurrection by the Spaniards, who will listen to any one because they groan under the Roman tyranny. But forever they plot, do nothing and then accuse one another. I would have nothing to do with it. But Pkauchios knew of nowhere, except in my great warehouse, to conceal his weapons from the Roman spies. He offered me a price—a big, a very big price for the accommodation. And he threatened, if I should refuse, to whisper a false charge against me."

"And you were weak enough to yield to that?" Tros asked him, wondering.

"I grow old. I needed money. Tros, I have sent much money to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the Temple. *Aie-yaie,* but will it ever be rebuilt! * Pkauchios swore that when Balbus is slain his debt to me shall be paid at once out of the treasury. I let him use my warehouse. And then Herod's spies! *Ach-h-h!* Herod came to me to-night with your letter in his hand. He would not say where or how he had obtained it. He said, 'What does Tros of Samothrace require of you? Tros is a pirate, proscribed by Cæsar, as all know. There is a reward of three talents set on the head of Tros of Samothrace.' He offered to share the reward with me—two for him and one for me. He said, 'Let us tempt this fellow Tros ashore with promises. Let us tempt him into your house, Simon, and then send for Balbus.' And he made threats. He said, 'Balbus would be interested to learn where those weapons are hidden in barrels and bales and boxes!' So I came with him, bribing the guard at the gate. And Tros, I don't know what to say or what to do!"

Simon bowed his head until it nearly touched the table, then rocked to and fro until the strong oak chair groaned under him. Tros closed his eyes in thought, and for a moment it appeared to him the cabin was repeopled. There were Fflur, Caswallon and the druid, bidding him good-by. He could see Fflur's gray eyes. He could hear her voice—"Be bold, Lord Tros!" And then the druid—"In the midst of danger thou shalt find the keys of safety!"

Tros leaned and patted Simon on the shoulder.

"What of Chloe?"

"A slave. A Gades dancing girl," said Simon as if that was the worst that could be said of any one. "From earliest infancy they are trained in treachery as well as dancing. That one has been trained by Pkauchios, than whom there is no more black-souled devil out of hell! None in his senses trusts the dancing girls of Gades. Balbus, so they say, trusts Chloe. He is mad—as mad as I was when I trusted him and Cæsar with my money! *Uh—uh!* Trust no dancing girl."

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* It was rebuilt several years later by Herod the Great.

"She seems to have trsuted you with her money," Tros remarked.

"Aye, and shame is on me. I took her money at interest, even as I took yours. I can not repay her."

"But I think you shall!" said Tros, and shut his eyes again to think. "You shall repay her and you shall repay me."

For a while there was silence, pulsed by Simon's heavy breathing and the lapping of light waves against the ship's hull.

"Simon!" Tros said at last. "I need the keys of Rome!"

"God knows I haven't them!" said Simon. "Until Crassus went to Syria I had a good, rich, powerful friend in Rome, but now no longer."

"But you have influence with Balbus since he owes you so much money?"

"Influence?" said Simon, sneering. "He invites me to his banquets, to over-eat and over-drink and watch the naked-bellied women dance. But I asked a favor only yesterday—only a little favor—leave to export a few hundred slaves to Rome. If they had been women he would have said yes, but he has placed an embargo on male slaves, to depress the local market so as to have cheap labor to rebuild Gades. He knows I have no female slaves, so it was no use lying to him. He answered, he would give permission gladly, only that Tros of Samothrace, the pirate proscribed by Cæsar, is at sea and might capture the whole consignment, for which he, Balbus, would be blamed. Bah! So much for my influence! He let Euripides, the Greek, export a hundred women only last week, and that was since Cæsar's letter came. Pirates! What he fears is a rising market! He knows I need money. He knows I have a thousand Lusitanii that I bought for export. At his suggestion, too. I bought them at his suggestion! Tros, it costs money to feed a thousand slaves! That dog Balbus waits and smiles and speaks me fair and watches for the day when I must sell those slaves at auction, so that he may buy them dirt cheap for his labor gangs!"

"But you stand well with Cæsar," Tros suggested. "You say Cæsar owes you three million—"

"Phagh!" Simon's face grew apoplectically purple. "Cæsar is the greatest robber of them all!"

"But he has brains," Tros retorted. "Caius Julius Cæsar knows it is wiser to keep an old friend than to be forever hunting new ones. Why did you lend him the money?"

"Because his creditors were after him and he promised me his influence. Of what use to me now in Gades is Cæsar's influence in Gaul? Tell me that! I wrote to him for my money, for a little something on account. No answer! I suppose a secretary read the letter. *Tschch!* With Cæsar it is face to face that counts. Nothing matters to him then but the impression he makes on bystanders. Vain! He thinks himself a god! He acts a drama, with himself the hero of it. Approach him, flatter him, ask for what he owes you in the presence of a dozen people and he will pay if it takes the last coin in his treasury. Pay if he has to capture and sell sixty thousand slaves to reimburse himself! That was how he repaid Crassus. Sixty thousand Gauls he sold in one year! *Tschah!* With a smile he will pay, if he has an audience. With a smile and a gesture that calls attention to his magnanimity and modesty and sense of justice! But a letter, opened by his secretary, read to him, perhaps, in a tent at night, when his steward has told him of a nice, young, pretty matron washed and combed and waiting to be brought to him—*Tshay-yeh-yeh!* None but a Jew, but a Jew—would have let him have three million sesterces!"

Tros tried to appear sympathetic. He leaned out of his chair and patted Simon on the shoulder. But the news of Simon's difficulties only strengthened his own confidence. When he was sure that Simon was not looking, he permitted a great grin to spread over his face.

No Roman warships in the harbor, conspiracies ashore, Simon's warehouse full of weapons, between decks two hundred and fifty first-class fighting men, demanding shore leave and agreeable to act the role of slaves for the occasion, Balbus the Roman governor ambitious, greedy, superstitious and in the toils of an Egyptian sorcerer whose slave, Chloe, a favorite of Balbus, was in a mood to betray her master—it would be strange, it would be incredible, if the gods could not evolve out of all that mixed material an opportunity for Tros of Samothrace to use his wits!

"Simon," he said. "Once you did my father a good turn in Alexandria. You did it without bargaining, without a price. I am my father's son. So I will help you, Simon. You shall pay your debts—"

"God send it!" Simon muttered.

"You shall be spared the shame of not repaying Chloe—"

"S-s-sheh-eh!" Simon drew in his breath as if something had stabbed him.

"We will both of us have our will of Balbus—"

"Uh-uh! He is all powerful in Gades. If they kill him, there will only be a worse one in his place!"

"You shall have your sesterces, and I, the key to Rome!"

"God send it! *Eh,* God send it!" Simon answered hopelessly. "But I think we shall all be crucified!"

"Not we!" Tros answered. "I have crucified a plan, that's all. A plan that can't be changed is like a fetter on a man's foot."

He arose and kicked out right and left by way of illustration that his brain was free to make the most of its opportunity.

CHAPTER LXXIII

THE COTTAGE IN PKAUCHIOS' GARDEN

If a man insults my dignity by seeking to make me the tool of treachery, let him look to his guard. For if he need it not, that shall be because I lack the skill to turn his treason on himself.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

ORWIC and Conops lay flat on a tiled floor with leather thongs biting their wrists and ankles. The only sound was the quiet breathing of the Jews who squatted with their backs against the wall. Thought was tense, speculative, almost audible, but Conops was the first to speak in a whisper to Orwic:

"Roll toward me. I can move my fingers. Maybe I can untie your—"

A Jew leaned through the dark and struck him on the mouth with the end of a leather strap. After that there was silence again—so still that the rats came and the slow drip-drip of water somewhere up behind the gallery began to sound like hammer blows on an anvil.

After an interminable time the Jews began to talk in muttered undertones. Then a woman brought food to them. There was a reek of pickled fish and onions that they guzzled in the dark. Orwic took advantage of the noise to try to chafe the thongs that bound his wrists, rubbing them against the floor tiles. But a Jew heard the movement and struck him. After that there was silence again, until one of the Jews fell asleep and snored.

There was no way of judging the time, but no light shone yet through the shutter-chinks when a furious knocking began at the street door. It boomed hollow through the house and brought the Jews to their feet, whispering to each other. One of them leaned over Orwic to examine his thongs and another kicked Conops in the ribs by way of wårning to be still. A woman leaned over the gallery and whispered excitedly. One of the Jews went out into the passage, lighted a lantern after a dozen nervous fumbles with the flint and steel and shouted angrily, but Conops, who knew many languages could not understand a word he said.

The knocking continued and grew louder, until the Jew with the lantern began talking to some one through a hole in the street door. He was answered by a woman's voice in Greek. She seemed to have no care for secrecy and Conops could hear her without the slightest effort.

"I say, admit me! Keep me waiting and I'll call the Romans! I tell you, I have a letter from Herod ben Mordecai! Open!"

The door opened. Several people entered. There was excited conversation in the passage. Up in the gallery the unseen Jewess fluttered like a frightened hen. The wooden railing creaked as she leaned over it to listen. Then the girl's voice in the passage again, loud and confident, speaking Greek:

"No use telling me lies! I know they're here! You've read Herod's letter, so out of my way!"

"Give me the letter then!"

"No!"

A scuffle, and then a girl in a damp Greek chlamys, with a thick blue blanket over that—and it surely never came from Hispania—stood in the doorway, holding the Jew's lantern. Over her shoulders two male Numidian slaves peered curiously.

"So there they are! Untie them! If they're hurt, I'll speak to Balbus and have him crucify the lot of you!"

Conops cried out to her in Greek:

"Get me my knife, mistress! Then no need to crucify them!"

She laughed.

"I am Chloe," she said. "I came from—"

Suddenly she checked herself, remembering the Jews were listening.

"You will do exactly what I say!" she went on. "No fighting! They shall give you back everything they have taken from you. Then come with me."

She looked like a princess to Orwic, although the blanket puzzled him. It did not for a second occur to him that she might be some one's slave, although her sandals were covered with filth from the barren land outside the city and he might have known no woman of position would have walked at that hour of the night. Had she not slaves of her own, who obeyed her orders? Did the Jews not slink away from her like whipped curs? Was her manner not royal, bold, authoritative?

Her Numidians took the weapons off the table—they had none of their own—and cut the thongs that bound wrists and feet.

"Now count your money!" she said, pointing at the purse. So Conops shook out the money on the table.

"Ten gold coins missing!" he remarked, chafing his wrists, rubbing one ankle against the other. If he might not use his knife, he was determined that the Jews should pay in some way for the privilege of having put him and Orwic to indignity. Instantly he wished he had said twenty gold coins.

The woman in the gallery began to scream imprecations in a mixture of Greek, Aramaic and the local dialect, which itself was a blend of two or three tongues. Chloe silenced her with a threat to call the city guards.

"Who will take more than ten gold-pieces," she remarked, "if I tell them I have authority from Balbus."

After a few moments, still noisily protesting, the woman threw ten coins down to the floor, one by one, and Conops gathered them, well paid for a night's imprisonment, but grinning at himself because he had not been smarter. Chloe took Orwic's hand and smiled to him, chafing his wrist between her palms.

"Are you ready? Will you come with me?" she asked engagingly in Gaulish.

Orwic would have gone with any one just then. To go with

Chloe, after lying in that smelly room with hands and feet tied, was such incredibly good fortune that he almost rubbed his eyes to find out whether he were dreaming. When she let go his hand he took his Roman sword from one of the Numidians and followed her into the passage; there he drew it to guard her back against the Jews, his head full of all sorts of flaming chivalry. She turned and whispered to him, raising her arms to draw his head close which, if he had thought of it, a princess hardly would have done on such scant acquaintance.

"You must walk through the streets with an arm around me," she said, using the Gaulish with a funny, foreign accent that thrilled him almost as much as her breath in his ear. "You must look like a Roman nobleman who has seduced a girl and takes her home with him. We must walk swiftly and then none will interfere with us."

She rearranged the blanket, throwing one end of it over her head, as a girl ashamed of prying eyes might do, and led the way into the street where she shrank, as if she needed the protection, into Orwic's left arm, under his pallium.

"To the left!" she said. "Forward! Quickly!"

The Jews' door slammed behind them, and the procession at once became perfectly regular. Conops understood the game now. He walked in front, just close enough for Chloe to call directions to him, his long knife tapping on the scabbard as a warning to all and sundry to keep their distance. The two Numidians brought up the rear, striding as if they were owned by Balbus himself. Being slaves of a slave, they were much more harmless than they looked.

Orwic's Celtic diffidence prevented him from speaking. He was not exactly shy. He was ashamed of having failed Tros and of having to be rescued by a woman, half inclined to think the gods had personally had a hand in it, so sudden and mysterious the rescue had been, and not a little bewildered, besides thrilled. He hurried along in silence for ten minutes through a maze of winding alleys, thinking furiously before Chloe volunteered some information.

"I sent my two women to Pkauchios to warn him to be up and ready for us."

But ignorant of who Pkauchios might be, Orwic simply turned that over in his mind. Developments seemed more mysterious than ever. Chloe went on talking:

"Pkauchios may try to scare you with his magic, but remember what I tell you: his magic is all humbug. He gets most of his secret information from us girls."

"Us girls" did not sound like the words a princess would have used. Orwic's wits were returning.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking down at her, pulling aside a corner of the blanket so as to see her face. It was very dark; he had to bend his head, and at a street corner a drunken Roman stopped his litter to laugh raucously.

"Ho there, Licurgus Quintus!" he roared. "I recognize you! Where did you find that pretty piece you have under your pallium? Mark me, I'll tell Livia! I'll tell them all about it at the baths to-morrow! Ha-ha-hah! Licurgus Quintus walking, and a girl under his pallium at this hour of the night. Ha-ha-ha-hah!"

Four slaves bore the litter off into the darkness, with its owner's legs protruding through the panel at the side.

"That drunken fool is Nimius Severus," Chloe remarked. "He offered to buy me last week. Bah! He has nothing but an appetite and debts to feed it with!"

"Who are you?" Orwic asked again.

"Chloe, the slave of Pkauchios of Egypt. I am called the favorite of Gades. Soon you shall see me dance, and you will know why."

"Oh!" said Orwic.

He relapsed into a state of shame again, his very ears red at the thought of having mistaken a slave girl for a princess. Being British, he had totally un-Roman notions about conduct; it was the fact that he had made the mistake, not that she was a slave, that annoyed him. Chloe misinterpreted the change of mood, that was as perceptible as if he had pushed her away from him.

"I expect to be free before long," she remarked.

Suddenly it occurred to Orwic that the best thing he could do would be to head straight for the beach and swim to the ship if there was no longboat waiting.

"Tros—is Tros on the ship?" he demanded.

But Chloe guessed rightly this time, understood that in another second he would be out of her reach, going like wind downhill toward the city gate.

"No," she lied instantly. "Tros is with Pkauchios."

Orwic detected the lie. She realized it.

"Tros came in search of you," she added.

But by that time Orwic did not believe a word she said. It seemed to him he was escaping from one danger to be trapped a second time.

"How did you learn where I was?" he demanded.

"Tros told me."

They had halted and were standing in the moonlight face to face where they could see each other. Her clever eyes read his, and she realized she needed more than words to convince him.

"Tros paid me to come and rescue you," she went on, raising the edge of her chlamys, showing a yard of bare leg as she thrust her fingers into a tiny pocket. "Look, he gave me that to come and rescue you."

She showed him a pearl in the palm of her hand, and it was big enough to convince Orwic that it might be one of those pearls that the druids had given to Tros. He decided to let her lead him farther but his normal mistrust of women, that Tros had encouraged by every possible means, increased tenfold.

"Though you hate me, you must walk as if you love me!" Chloe remarked, and he had to take her underneath his pallium again.

The stars were bright and it lacked at least an hour of dawn when they emerged into a rather wider street that led between extensive villas set in gardens. Trees leaned over the walls on either hand. Toward the end of the street there was a bronze gate set into a high wall over which a grove of cypresses loomed black against the sky; a panel in that gate slid back the moment Chloe whistled; a dark face eyed her through the hole, and instantly the gate swung wide on silent hinges. There was a sound of splashing fountains and an almost overwhelming scent of flowers. Tiles underfoot, but a shadow cast by the cypresses so deep that it was impossible to see a pace ahead.

Fifty yards away among the trees were lights that appeared to emerge between chinks of a shutter, but Chloe took Orwic's hand and led him in a different direction, through a shadowy maze of shrubs that murmured in the slight sea breeze, until they reached a cottage built of marble, before whose door a lantern hung from a curved bronze bracket.

Two Greek girls came to the door and greeted Chloe deferentially. One of them behaved toward Conops as if he were a handsome Roman officer instead of the ugliest one-eyed, horny-handed Levantine sailor she had ever set eyes on. The Numidian slaves found weapons somewhere—took their stand outside the door on either side of it, with great curved swords unsheathed. Chloe nodded to them as she led the way in.

Orwic followed her because there was light inside and the place did not look like a trap or a prison, although the small, square windows were heavily barred. There was a fairly large room, beautifully furnished in a style so strange to his British notions that he felt again as if Chloe must be at least a princess. By the British firesides minstrels had always sung of princes and princesses in disguise who rescued people out of foul dungeons and conveyed them to bowers of beauty, where they married and lived happy ever after; and it is what the child is taught that the grown man thinks of first in strange surroundings. True, British slaves were very often treated like the members of a family, but he had never heard of a slave-girl living in such luxury as this.

There was a second room curtained off from the first, and into that Chloe vanished, through curtains of glittering beads that jingled musically. One woman followed, and there were voices, laughter, splashing. Almost before Orwic had had time to let the other woman, on her knees before him, clean his sandals, and before Conops had done staring pop-eyed at the rugs and gilded couch, the little Greek bronze images of half a dozen gods, the curtains from Damascus and the pottery from Crete, Chloe stood rearrayed in front of them, fresh flowers in her hair, in gilded sandals, with a wide gold border on a snow-white chlamys. Over her shoulders was a shawl more beautiful than anything Orwic had ever seen.

"You, a slave?" he said, staring, wishing his own tunic was not soiled from the night's adventure.

Smiling at him merrily, she read and understood the chivalry that stirred him. Suddenly her face turned wistful, but she was careful not to let Conops see the changed expression. Levantines were experts in incredulity.

"Yes," she said, "but you can help me to be free. Will you wait here while I find the Lord Tros?"

She was gone before he could answer, closing the door but not locking it, as Orwic was quick to discover. He would have followed her to ask more questions, but the two Numidians prevented him politely enough but firmly, drawing no particular attention to the great curved swords they held. Staring at them, realizing they were slaves, Orwic decided that he and Conops could quite easily defeat them if necessity arose. Noticing there was no lock on the outside of the door, but only a slide-bolt on the inside, he returned to question the two women.

But they knew no Gaulish. One of them was fussing over Conops, putting up a brave pretense of being thrilled by his advances, which were seamanly of the harbor-front sort. Conops began to sing a song in Greek that all home-faring sailors heard along the wharves of Antioch, Joppa, Alexandria and wherever else the harpy women waited to deprive them of the coins earned in the teeth of Neptune's gales. It was not a civilized song, though it was old when Homer was a youth in Chios, and its words aimed at the core of primitive emotion.

To keep him entertained, the women danced for him when one of them had brought out wine from the inner room. And because the dance was not the bawdy entertainment of the beach-booths, but a sort of poetry of motion beyond Conops' ken, they kept him half excited and half mystified, thus manageable until Chloe came back, lithe and alert in the doorway, with a look of triumph in her eyes.

"Tros?" Orwic asked her instantly.

"He has gone with Pkauchios to Balbus' house," she answered.

But it was once more clear to Orwic she was lying. Tros, he knew, would never have gone away without first setting eyes on him, or, at any rate, without first sending a message, if only a word or two of reassurance.

"What did he say?" he demanded.

"He was gone when I got to the house."

That, too, was a lie. She had been gone too long not to have talked with somebody; and there was a look of triumph in her eyes, that she was trying to conceal but could not.

"I, too, go to Balbus!" said Orwic. He gestured to Conops to follow, and strode for the door with his left hand on his sword-hilt.

Chloe slammed the door shut and stood defiant with her back against it.

"Prince of Britain!" she said, laughing, but her laugh was challenging and confident. "Be wise! All Gades would like Chloe for a friend! All Gades fears the name of Pkauchios! You are safe here. I have promised the Lord Tros no harm shall happen to you, and he holds my pledge."

Orwic sat down on the gilded couch to disarm her alertness. It offended his notions of chivalry to feel obliged to use force to a woman, but the mystery annoyed him more than the dilemma. It had begun to dawn on him that he was dealing with a girl whose instinct for intrigue prevented her from telling stark truth about anything. For a second, observing Conops' antics through the corner of his eye, he even thought of making love to her; but he was too much of an aristocrat for that thought to prevail; he would have felt ashamed to let Conops see him do it.

Above all else he felt stupid and embarrassed in the strange environment, aware that he would be as helpless as a child by daylight in the city streets. He had not even the remotest notion how a Roman would behave himself in Gades, and was sure the crowd would detect his foreign bearing in an instant. His Celtic diffidence and thin-skinned fear of being laughed at so oppressed him that he actually laughed at his own embarrassment.

"That is better!" said Chloe and sat down beside him.

But he noticed she had shot the door-bolt, and he did not doubt there was some trick to the thing that would baffle anybody in a hurry.

"Why do you keep on lying to me?" he demanded.

"Don't you know all women lie?" she asked him. "We arrive at the truth by other means than by telling it. Prince of Britain, if I told you naked truth you would believe me mad, and you would act so madly there would be no saving you!"

Conops was becoming rougher and more like an animal every minute. Chloe's two slave-women were having all their work to keep out of his clutches, the one teasing while the other broke away, turn and turn. At last he seized one woman's wrist and twisted it. She screamed.

Chloe sprang to the rescue, broke a jar over Conops' head, and had his knife before he could turn to defend himself. He knew better than to try to snatch the knife back. His practised eye could tell that she could use it.

"Pardon, mistress!" he said civilly. "I was only playing with the girls."

Chloe tossed the knife into the air and caught it, noticing that both men wondered at her skill. She said something in Greek, too swift and subtle for Conops' marlin-spike intelligence—more dull than usual just then from the effect of honied wine and an emotion stirred by dancing girls—then frowned, her mind searching for phrases in Gaulish.

"You can use weapons," she said, her gesture including both men. "I, too. The Armenian who trained me meant me for a female gladiator. But the ædile * to whom I was offered said it would be bad for Roman morals, so I was sold to Pkauchios. You are male and I female. What else is there that you are, and I not?"

Orwic smiled his way into her trap.

"Are you free?" he suggested. "I am a prince of Britain." He said it very courteously.

"Now! This morning!" she retorted. "How about to-night? My father and my mother were free citizens of Athens, if you know where that is. The Roman armies came. I was sold at my mother's breast. She died of lifting grape baskets in a Falerian vineyard, and I was sold to the Armenian, whose trade was the invention of new orgies. But I was not quite like the ordinary run of slave-girls, so I was spared a number of indignities for the sake of the high price I might bring. If the Armenian had not set such a high price on me, I think the ædile would not have talked so glibly about morals. To-day I am a slave. To-night I think I will be a freed woman; to-morrow, wholly free. And you? Does it occur to you, Prince of Britain, that there is none but I who can keep you from falling into Balbus' hands? Balbus would condemn you as an enemy of Rome. He would put you up at auction to the highest bidder. Why, you might be my slave in a week from now!"

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* Ædile: The elected Roman official responsible for the public games and the adornment of the city, which he had to provide largely at his own expense. Ædileship was a stepping stone to higher office. Ædiles ran extravagantly into debt in the hope of reimbursing themselves if elected to a consulship.

She had his attention at any rate. He laughed and his hand went to his sword-hilt, but his eyes looked worried. Conops watched her with a gleam in his one, steely eye, his muscles tightening for a sudden leap at her; but she understood Conops perfectly and changed the long knife from her left hand to her right with a convincing flicker of the bright Damascus steel.

"You sit there and keep still!" she ordered. "I am not concerned about you in the least. You may die if you wish! You," she said, looking at Orwic, "shall not be harmed if I can help it. You must make up your mind you will trust me, or else—"

"Why did you lie?" Orwic asked her.

She laughed.

"You are here. You are safe. If I had told you the Lord Tros was on his ship, would you have come with me?"

Orwic shrugged his shoulders. "Well, what next?" he asked.

"You must do exactly what I say. Pkauchios knows you are here. He has gone to Balbus to persuade him to let the Lord Tros anchor in the harbor unmolested."

"Could he prevent that?" Orwic asked, remembering Tros's great catapults and arrow-engines.

"And to persuade Balbus to invite Tros ashore for a conference under guarantee of protection. When Pkauchios returns, I will take you to him and leave you with him. I have told Pkauchios, and I will tell him again that you are a superstitious savage. Remember that. You are to agree to anything that Pkauchios proposes, no matter what it is."

"And you?"

"I go to Tros and perhaps also to Balbus. I take Conops with me because Tros, perhaps, might not believe me when I tell him you are unharmed, and I think the Lord Tros is not easy to manage. Also, Conops is a nuisance, who will get drunk presently, and there is no place to lock him up except in the *ergastulum*. And I can take Conops through the streets in daylight because he is a Greek who will arouse no comment."

"And if I refuse to trust you?" Orwic asked.

"I will have to lock you both in the *ergastulum*. It is not a pleasant place. It is dark in there, and dirty There are insects. Listen!" she said, obviously making a concession to his prejudices.

A blind man could have guessed it went against the grain in her to lift a corner of the curtain of intrigue.

"You will spoil everything unless you obey me absolutely! Tros wants—I don't know what. But I will get it for him. I go presently to make sure that Balbus' promise of protection shall be worth more than the breath he breathes out when he makes it. Simon the Jew wants his money. Tros, I think, can get it for him. I want my freedom. Pkauchios, well, Pkauchios himself will tell you what he wants. Are you still afraid to trust me? Listen then. Tros holds a pledge of mine worth more to me than all the wealth of Gades. He keeps my lover on his ship!"

If Orwic had known more about the reputation of the Gades dancing girls, he would have mistrusted her the more for that admission. But she would not have made it to a man of more experience. She was as shrewd as he was innocent. Conops, cynically sneering, merely rallied Orwic's inborn chivalry:

"Huh! In Gades they change lovers just as often as the ships come in!"

Whatever she was or was not, Chloe looked virginal in that Greek chlamys with the plain gold border and the flowers in her hair. And whatever she felt or did not feel, she could act the very subtleties of an emotion instantly. She looked stung, baffled, conscious of the servitude that made her reputation any man's to sneer away, ashamed, albeit modest and aware of inner dignity. She blushed. Her eyes showed anger that she seemed to know was useless. Orwic passionately pitied her.

"You dog!" he snarled disgustedly through set teeth. "Go with her! Go back to Tros! And when I come, if I learn you have not treated her respectfully, I will have Tros tie you to the mast and flog you—as he did the rowers when they shamed those girls in Vectis!"

"Oh, never mind him," said Chloe. "He is only a sailor."

She hung her head, as Orwic believed, bashfully. But Conops understood right well it was to hide the flash of triumph in her eyes. She had Orwic where she wanted him. But what could a cynical seaman do or say, though he knew all ports and had been tangled in many snares of siren women, to convince a nobleman of Britain that a gesture and a glance were possibly play acting and not proof of honesty? Conops shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said. "I'll go with her to the ship. You stay here and run your own risks!"

CHAPTER LXXIV

GAIUS SUETONIUS

My father taught me, and I know, that manners are the cloak of dignity, and dignity is man's awareness of his own Soul.

But I have yet to learn that peacock people are entitled to the courtesies that manhood commands without asking.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

THE first rule of all crises being that no man behaves according to the law of averages, if there is one, or according to expectation or in keeping with the dignity of great events—which surely calls for a continuous procession of brass bands, torches, incense and acclamation—Tros and Simon slept. They snored, Tros forward on the table, Simon leaning sackwise in the chair. They were fast asleep at dawn when Sigurdsen appeared, enormous in the cabin doorway, to announce the first glimpse of the sun.

"Tide in about an hour, Lord Tros!"

Simon snored on. Tros blew the air out of his lungs, filled them two or three times, felt by instinct for his sword, simultaneously glancing at the water clocks, ran fingers through his long, black hair, looked curiously once or twice at Simon, nodded and knew his mind.

"Serve breakfast. Then out oars! Man arrow-engines, clear away the catapults, ammunition ready in the racks, deck crew at quarters. Then haul short. We enter Gades harbor when the tide makes."

The ship became a thing of ordered tumult, din succeeding din and a smell of hot smoked fish pervading. Simon awoke with a number of grunts and "ohs" and "ahs," remembered where he was and fell incontinently into panic.

"Tros! Tros!" he gasped. "We talked madness!"

"Aye, Simon, aye! The gods love madmen!"

"Phagh! You sicken me with talk of many gods! Why not have a

row of smirking idols? Worship them! Such talk, such talk, and we, looking death in the face!"

"We will see Gades first and then look Balbus in the face!" Tros answered. "Simon—madder than the gods themselves and than the wind and waves, a man needs be who will risk his neck for friendship! Aye, mad enough to trespass in the porch of wisdom! Rot me reason and religion when the die is cast! Talk yesterday, act now, to-morrow shall say yea or nay to it!"

He laughed and went up on the poop to watch the ship made ready, washed down, cleared for action, ammunition set in racks and baskets, sand-boxes filled, pumps tested and the trained crews stationed each in its appointed place. Then he ordered one great purple sail spread as a tribute to his own pride, and started the drums and cymbals going to slow measure, that the oars might take up the strain on the anchor-cable.

He gave the helm to Sigurdsen and whistled to himself, striding from side to side of the broad poop to con the harbor entrance, pausing in his stride to listen when the Northman in the chains called out the soundings, memorizing landmarks, feeling as brave and careless as he looked in his gold-edged purple cloak. He wished there might be fifty thousand Romans on the beach to see his ship come in!

But the harbor, splendid with its thirty-mile circumference, looked strangely empty. There was one great trireme hauled out on the beach beside a row of sheds, and six ships that had wintered on the beach lay newly launched, high-sided, all in ballast. One long rakish craft was certainly from Delos, anchored apart from the others—probably a pirate captured by a Roman fleet and kept to be taken to Ostia and sold at auction. Vague objects fastened in her rigging looked suspiciously like the remains of human bodies crucified and picked to pieces by the sea-birds.

Fishing boats swarmed on the beach and at anchor nearer shore, and there were rows of sheds in straight lines at the seaward end of a narrow road that led from city wall to beach. The city gleamed white in the sun, but its high wall looked dirty and needed repair; outside the wall there were villages of shacks and shambles clustered close against it, and between them a tired looking grove of palm trees, surrounded a cluster of thatched booths.

Between city wall and harbor was a waste of common land, all swamp and rubbish heaps. The shore was piled with seaweed, rotten with the colors of decay and black with flies.

The principal signs of Roman rule were the villas of officials set in gardens near the summit of the slope on which the city stood and, on a hill to the north of the city, a military camp with regular lines of tents and huts and four straight, paved roads leading to it. The lower part of the city was a crowded jumble of mixed Carthaginian, Greek, Roman and native roofs.

Tros dropped anchor within catapult range of the hauled-out trireme. That and the store-sheds were at his mercy, although the city itself was beyond reach of his flaming stinkballs. Trembling, gnawing at a hot smoked herring, Simon came to the poop and pointed out the sheds where all the wine was stored for export to Alexandria in exchange for corn and onions.

"We'll save Pompey's people a few headaches by destroying that stuff unless Balbus comes to terms!" said Tros.

But there were already signs of Balbus. A liburnian put out from a wharf near the store-sheds, leisurely rowed by slaves in clean white uniforms. It had a bronze standard in the bow with the initials S.P.Q.R., and in the stern under an awning sat a Roman, dressed in the latest military fashion.

Simultaneously, another swifter boat, whose crew were not so neatly dressed nor nearly so in love with dignity, put out from a point much nearer to the ship and speeded at the rate of two to the liburnian's one. It had no awning. Chloe in the stern was plainly visible encouraging the rowers. Conops sat beside her.

The smaller, faster boat bumped alongside, reckless of Tros's vermilion paint, and Chloe came up the rope-ladder like an acrobat, bacchanalian with her wreath awry and her gilded sandals stained with harbor water.

"Lord Tros!" she exclaimed, breathless with excitement, "your great ship makes a braver spectacle than any Gades ever saw! I love it! We all love it! Look!"

She waved her hand toward the city wall whose summit was already black with people gazing. But Tros took more note of a hundred men who marched behind a mounted officer from the camp to the north of the city toward the shore.

"Orwic?" he demanded.

Conops answered him, climbing the poop steps sullenly with the air of a man expecting punishment:

"He lingers with the dancing women in a marble palace. Master, he refused to come away with me!"

Chloe seized Tros's arm and began speaking in a hurry with excited emphasis.

"Trust me! Now trust me, Lord Tros! Your prince of Britain is absolutely safe! Look you! In that liburnian sits Gaius Suetonius. He is a youngster whom Cæsar sent to Balbus with a recommendation, a wastrel whom Cæsar wished to be rid of, but whom he did not care to offend because of his influence in Rome. Balbus makes a lot of him for Cæsar's sake, and also because they play into each other's hands to cheat the treasury. He comes with Balbus' permission to you to go ashore and talk with him. Now listen, listen, listen! Gaius Suetonius knows most of Balbus' secrets. Balbus would never dare to let him—"

"I understand," Tros answered and strode to the break of the poop to summon men to stand by the ladder and salute the Roman.

He was just in time to provide a flourish of drums and trumpets and to rearrange his own purple cloak becomingly. Chloe vanished into the cabin and Simon followed.

The Roman approached the poop with the peculiar, half patronizing, noncommittal but amused air of the aristocratic Roman face to face with something new. The sun shone on his heavily embossed bronze body armor and his nodding crimson plume was nearly twice the regulation size. He was immaculate down to the tips of his finger-nails, much too calculating, insolent and greedy looking to be handsome but possessed of strong, regular features and a muscularity not yet much softened by debauch. His richly decorated shield was borne behind him by a Greek slave, the impudence of whose stare was an exaggeration of his master's.

Tros eyed them sourly, but obliged himself to smile a little when the Roman condescendingly acknowledged the salute.

"You are Tros of Samothrace? I am Gaius Suetonius, master of the ceremonies and confidential agent of Lucius Cornelius Balbus Minor, Governor of Gades."

Tros bowed suitable acknowledgement. The Roman turned himself at leisure to observe the arrow-engines and the crews at battle station by the catapults.

"What does this warlike preparation mean?" he asked.

"I am prepared!" Tros answered with a characteristic upward gesture of both hands. His left hand returned to his sword-hilt, whereat the Roman looked as if he had a bad smell under his nose.

"Prepared for what?"

"To receive your message and to answer hot or cold, whichever it calls for."

"You are insolent."

"Balbus charged you with something definite to say. I listen."

"You would have found it wiser to have been courteous to me!" said Gaius Suetonius angrily. "You will find insolence expensive!"

Tros almost turned his back, which brought him face to face with Conops, standing by the poop rail. He made a gesture, unseen by the Roman. Conops vaulted to the deck and went forward without noticeable haste. The Roman turned as if about to go and spoke over his shoulder to add visible rudeness to his tone of cold contempt.

"Lucius Cornelius Balbus Minor invites you to the courthouse at the morning session to confer with him. He promises immunity for the occasion."

"Wait!"

Tros's voice was like a thunder clap. It startled the Roman into facing about—suddenly, indignantly. So he did not notice the dozen Northmen whom Conops was shepherding one by one under the break of the poop. They came unostentatiously, but armed.

"Did Lucius Cornelius Balbus offer a guarantee?" Tros asked.

"You have his promise conveyed by me," Gaius Suetonius retorted, sneering. But Tros smiled.

"It appears to me he sent you as hostage!"

The Roman's jaw dropped.

"By Bacchus!" he exploded. "You will suffer for it if you try to make me prisoner! I represent the Senate and the Roman People!"

"Aye, handsomely!" Tros answered, grinning. "I wouldn't spoil your finery! You and that slave of yours shall have snug quarters for a while, where he may keep your armor bright and you may tell him all about the Senate and the Roman People. Lest he grow weary of listening and try to slay you with that sword, I will keep it well out of his reach!"

Tros held out his hand. The Roman's right hand went to his sword-hilt and his face turned crimson with anger; the slave behind him made haste to pass the shield, but Conops was too quick, struck the slave over the jugular and the shield went clattering to the deck. The Northmen swarmed on to the poop and the Roman saw himself surrounded.

"Dog of a pirate, you shall pay for this!" he snarled. He held his chin high, but he drew his sword and gave it hilt-first into Tros's hand. Tros glanced at Conops.

"Into the forward deckhouse with them! Lock them in. No other restraint as long as they behave themselves. Stand you on guard with as many Northmen as you need."

Gaius Suetonius strode forward fuming in the midst of his ax-armed escort. Tros could not resist a gibe at him.

"An omen! Lo, the Consul and his lictors! Is the foretaste of a consulship not worth the day's confinement, Gaius Suetonius?"

Tros went into the cabin where Simon sat with his head between his hands refusing to listen to Chloe's optimistic reassurances. And after a short conference with Chloe he wrote a letter in Greek because, though he understood Latin well enough, he could write the Greek more elegantly.

To the most noble and renowned Lucius Cornelius Balbus Minor, Governor of Gades, Greeting from Tros of Samothrace, the Master of the Trireme *Liafail,* who cordially thanks you for your invitation to attend you at a session of the court.

Your statesmanlike provision of a hostage in the person of the noble Gaius Suetonius removes all possible objection to my visit which, therefore, shall be made without delay, the more so since I appreciate the compliment of sending me as hostage one of such rank and so intimate in your secret counsels.

The hostage shall be comfortably housed and safely guarded. He shall be released unharmed, with the dignities due to his rank immediately after my own safe return on board my ship.

That morning irony was running in Tros's veins. He felt an impulse to be mischievous. To use his own phrase, gods were whispering good jokes into his ear. A glance at Simon, shuddering with nervousness, and at Chloe, all smiles and excitement, confirmed his mood. He opened an iron chest and took from it the seal he had captured a year ago along with Cæsar's private papers.

It was of glass and of marvelous workmanship, done by a Greek —a portrait of Julius Cæsar naked, in the guise of the god Hermes with an elephant's head below it, by the hand of some other artist who had certainly never seen an elephant.*

Tros melted a mass of wax and affixed the impression of that well-known seal at the foot of the letter, which he placed in a silver tube, and went and tossed it to the men in the boat that had brought out Gaius Suetonius.

"To the Governor of Gades with all haste!" he commanded.

The boat backed away and made speed for the shore. Tros returned to the cabin and sent for Sigurdsen and Conops.

"In my absence," he said, touching Sigurdsen's breast, "you are captain of the ship. The crew obeys you. But you obey Conops, who is my representative. I go ashore, and unless I return before dawn tomorrow you will put to sea after demolishing that trireme on the beach and all the stores and sheds. If I shall have been made prisoner, that hint will probably convince the Romans they would better release me. So you will keep in sight of the harbor mouth and hold speech with any boat the Romans send out. But you are not to surrender that hostage Gaius Suetonius except in exchange for me."

"Master, let me go with you!" urged Conops.

But there was no need for Chloe's warning frown; Tros had made up his mind.

"I can trust you afloat," he remarked. "Ashore you're too ready with your knife and a lot too fond of drink and women! Stand by the ship. You're in charge. Be careful of the prisoners."

Jaun Aksue came then, none too deferential, demanding information as to when the shore leave might be had.

"We Eskualdenak are fond of seeing promises performed," he remarked. "My men are boasting they could swim ashore. Can you suggest to me how to restrain them?"

"Yes," Tros answered gravely, "tell them I go to pay a visit to the Governor of Gades. I will seek permission for my best behaved men to go roistering. But have you seen those Balearic slingers on the beach? You know their reputation? They can hit a man's head with a slung stone at two hundred paces. None of you have weapons. And mark this: Balbus the Governor needs cheap slaves for his quarry gangs. I will make him a free present of as many of my men as those Balearic slingers stun with their stones and capture!"

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* The elephant's head became the seal of all the Cæsars.

"But your promise holds? We are to have shore leave?"

"Certainly," said Tros, "but when it suits me and on condition you pretend you are my slaves."

Chloe listened to that conversation, her eyes intently studying Tros's face. She turned to him and touched his arm when Aksue swaggered forward to explain the situation to his men.

"Lord Tros!" she exclaimed. "You can make yourself master of Gades! I can show you how! Make use of Pkauchios until the moment when he—then—"

Tros gazed at her, his amber eyes admiring and yet smiling with a comprehension deeper than her own. It baffled her.

"What do you really seek in Gades?" she demanded.

He did not answer her for thirty seconds. Then:

"For a beginning, the Lord Orwic. Where is he?"

"In Pkauchios' house."

Tros nodded.

"You shall take me to Pkauchios."

His eyes did not leave her face. All sorts of probabilities were passing in review before his mind, not least of them that a Gades dancing girl would hardly carry all her eggs in one chance-offered basket. She would have alternatives that she could switch to at a moment's notice.

"You would better go down in the hold," he remarked, "and confer with Horatius Verres. Better ask him whether he won't change his mind and try his luck again ashore."

It seemed to Tros that Chloe caught her breath, but she was so well trained in self-command that he could not be quite sure.

"I will go to him, I will warn him to stay where he is," she said, smiling, and was already on her way, but Tros detained her.

"Wait! He goes ashore now to take his chance in Gades unless you tell me who and what he is."

Chloe stared, at first impudently, then with wavering emotions. Her lips began to move as if in spite of her.

"Tros of Samothrace, you are a strong man, yet you are not a pig. You have not made love to me. I can trust you?"

"Yes," said Tros.

"If I tell you who Horatius Verres is—"

"I will keep it secret."

"He is Cæsar's spy!"

Tros did not move, although he shaped his lips as if to whistle.

"Cæsar spies on Balbus?"

Chloe nodded. Tros began to stroke his chin.

"Horatius Verres has sent his messenger to Gaul," said Chloe. "There is nothing further he can do until—"

Tros seized her shoulder.

"Until what?"

"Until Cæsar himself comes!"

"Hispania is not Cæsar's province! Cæsar has Gaul. Pompey has Hispania."

"I know it!"

"When does he come?"

"I don't know! Nobody knows! Horatius Verres doesn't know!"

"And Balbus?"

"No. He doesn't dream of it!"

"By land or sea?"

"None knows! Cæsar never tells what he will do."

"And Horatius Verres waits for him, eh?—on my ship!"

"Tros, Lord Tros, you promised—"

"Go and talk to your Verres. Tell him I know he is Cæsar's spy. Say I will not interfere with him."

"I will not! If I admitted I had told you, he would cease to love me. He would say I am a common Gades dancing girl."

"Tell him I guessed he is Cæsar's spy."

"He would never believe. He is too keen. He can read me like writing."

"I have seen writings that deceived the reader," Tros remarked and stroked his chin again.

"Listen!" exclaimed Chloe. "Thus it happened: Cæsar sent a thousand Gauls to Gades to be shipped to Rome for sale for his private account. Balbus put them in the quarries, where the most part died for he did not feed them properly and there was a fever.* Cæsar, receiving no word of the arrival of the slaves in Ostia, sent Horatius Verres to find out about it. He spied and he discovered that Pkauchios, pretending to have read the stars, told Balbus he might safely keep the slaves because Cæsar will presently die."

"How did Verres discover that?" Tros asked.

"I told him! Pkauchios makes prophecies come true. You understand me? He sent his own men to Gaul to murder Cæsar. I knew all about it. I told Horatius Verres because he said he loves me, and I know that is the truth just as I know when an egg is fresh, just as I know I can trust you, Tros of Samothrace. But then I had to tell more, just as a witness has to when the torturers go to work. One piece of information led quite simply to the next. I told Horatius Verres how Pkauchios grew afraid that when Cæsar is slain Balbus might turn on him and have him crucified for the sake of appearances. There are always plots on foot in Gades, so Pkauchios joined a conspiracy to murder Balbus. He began by merely listening and giving his advice, but now he leads it. And I am afraid! I am afraid Balbus may discover everything and put me to the torture. That is why I want my freedom quickly, quickly, why I want to get away from Gades!"

"And Horatius Verres lies in hiding while all this is afoot?"

"He hides from Pkauchios. Somebody, I don't know who, warned Pkauchios, who put a dozen men to look for him and kill him. But he was hiding in the midst of danger, on the roof of the *ergastulum*."

"Hasn't he tried to warn Balbus?"

"He daren't. Besides, what does he care about Balbus? He is Cæsar's man."

"What do you mean by 'he daren't'?"

"Balbus would order his head cut off or have him stabbed or crucify him. As soon as Pkauchios learned there was a spy of Cæsar's in Gades, he pretended to read the stars and went to Balbus, saying there would come a Roman with a tale about conspiracies, but that the tale would be a lie and that the man's real purpose would be to get Balbus into difficulties with the Roman Senate."

"And Balbus believed that?" Tros whistled softly to himself. "And the Lord Orwic is with Pkauchios? And, why waits Pkauchios?" he demanded. "Why hasn't he slain Balbus?"

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* Gades was always one of the unhealthiest places in Europe.

"He likes others to do that work," Chloe answered. "And the others are hard to bring up to the point. They are half mistrustful, and they fear the soldiers. It is always so in Gades—talk, talk, talk, and then some one at last dares it or else somebody betrays. There has been one betrayal already. Balbus has made some unimportant prisoners. But I think this time Pkauchios has his plans well laid and merely waits for the news of Cæsar's death. Then he will strike swiftly, and he thinks all Hispania and Gaul will rise together and throw off the Roman yoke."

Tros laughed.

"Your Pkauchios can dream!" he said with irony. "When Gaul joins Hispania against the Romans we may look for the Greek Kalends! Divide—*divide et impera!* * Go and talk to Horatius Verres in the hold. Reassure him and be swift about it. You shall take me to the courthouse to see Balbus, and thereafter to the house of Pkauchios."

She hesitated. There was indecision, terror in her eyes. Her muscles twitched at the thought of the Roman tortures. Tros nodded to her confidently.

"You shall have your freedom and your pearls and your Horatius Verres before to-morrow's dawn!"

Chloe stared into his amber eyes, nodded to herself, and went down into the hold to do his bidding.

CHAPTER LXXV

PKAUCHIOS THE ASTROLOGER

It has been my destiny to speak with wisemen, of whom there are more in the world than fools imagine. Though I comprehend not wisdom, I respect it; to salute it stirs in me no shame, whatever else. My sword and my whole heart are at wisdom's bidding, if I find it. But the wise are wisely quiet. They forbid not, neither do they bid me to go storming after virtue, that being the impulse to which I yield because I know no better.

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* "Divide and rule," the motto of the Roman Empire and the secret of its mastery.

Aye, I have met wisemen. I have yet to meet one who dealt in treachery, or counseled treason, or pretended to know what he knew not.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

CHLOE had pushed Orwic into a room in a marvelous marble house and left him face to face with Pkauchios, closing the curtains behind him on their noisy rings and rod. Orwic stared at the Egyptian, wondering at the severely splendid furnishings and at the quiet that was accented by lute strings strummed slowly in another room, suggesting the procession of the æons and the utter insignificance of days—months—years.

Pkauchios was dressed as an astrologer—a tall old man, immensely dignified, in flowing black robes and head-dress, with the asp of Egypt on his brow, to which Tros would have at once known he was not entitled. But Orwic knew nothing about Egypt. He had an hypnotic presence, and used his large eyes, as a swordsman should, directing his gaze not at the pupils of the man in front of him but a fraction of an inch lower, so producing the effect of an indomitable stare without wearying himself or giving his opponent a chance to retaliate.

He possessed almost the majesty of a Lord Druid, but that only served to remind Orwic of the druids' warnings about magic. He had been educated by the druids, and whatever else they taught, they were succinct and vehement in their instruction as to the danger of any contact with the black arts.

Bridling at the calculated silence, Orwic broke it, asking curt, blunt questions:

"You are Pkauchios? I am Orwic of Britain. You sent for me? You wish to speak to me? What do you wish to say?"

There was no answer, no acknowledgement. Sweet-scented incense of lign-aloes burned on a tripod-table, and its blue smoke curled around the Egyptian until, where he stood in shadow, he began to look unearthly, and the human skull on another table near his right hand appeared to make grimaces, mocking the short-lived dreams of men.

Orwic shrugged his shoulders and strolled to the open window. Down a vista between well-tended garden shrubbery he could see Tros's ship at anchor, miles away. The sight encouraged him; he began to think of jumping through the window, measuring with his eyes the height of the wall at the end of the garden and calculating the distance to the beach. But the Egyptian spoke at last—

"Orwic, Prince of Britain, fortune favors you!"

The voice was resonant, arresting, but the Gaulish words were ill pronounced. Orwic remembered druids who had spoken in much the same terms more gently, and yet with infinitely greater majesty.

"I was born lucky," he answered over his shoulder, and then resumed his gaze out of the window.

"Look at me. Look into my eyes," said Pkauchios.

"I admire the view," said Orwic, and continued to admire it.

Pkauchios ignored the snub and went on speaking as if Orwic had obeyed him. He badly mispronounced the Gaulish, but his voice compelled attention, and he was fluent.

"I, who nightly read the stars, have read your destiny! I forewarned Balbus of the great ship with the golden serpent at her bow. The stars in their conjunction said that ship should—shall—must enter Gades harbor, and from out of her shall step one in whose hand is the destiny of Hispania and Gaul. I said, because the constellations indicated, that the man will be a prince from a far country, bold in war, young, handsome, destined to be lost in Gades but to be recovered by a stranger. Last night I told Balbus that the prince in the ship with the purple sails will arrive before dawn."

"Well. Here I am, but it is not my ship," said Orwic, and began to whistle softly to himself. When he was a little boy the druids told him that was the simplest means of avoiding a magician's snares.

But magicians are not easily rebuffed. The business of snaring men in nets made of imagination implies a thick skin and persistence, along with an immeasurable, cynical contempt for the prospective victim's powers of resistance.

"You are indeed the man the stars foretold," said Pkauchios with admiration in his voice. "Indifferent to flattery, not stirred by rumor, iron-willed! It is of such men that the gods make weapons when the tyrannies shall fall! I see your aura—purple as the sails of yonder ship!"

He struck a bronze gong and the music in the next room ceased. The sound of the gong startled Orwic, for it resembled the clash of weapons. He turned suddenly to face the Egyptian, who was no longer standing but seated on a sort of throne, whose arms were the gilded tusks of elephants. There was a canopy above the throne that threw that corner into deeper shadow, and the Egyptian's eyes appeared to blaze as if there were fire in them. In his lap he held a crystal ball, which he raised in both hands when he was sure that Orwic's gaze was fixed on him.

"Approach me!" he commanded. "Nay, not too close, or your shadow dims the astral light!"

He was staring at the crystal, frowning heavily, brows raised, lips parted, eyes glaring. The effort he was making seemed to tax his powers almost beyond endurance.

"You are the man!" he said at last, and sighing, set the crystal down on the table where the skull stood. His eyes had lost their frenzy suddenly. He leaned back, looking deathly weary, all the lines and wrinkles on his dark face emphasized by pallor.

"You, who listen, never know what we, who look into the unseen, suffer for your sakes," he said.

Even his voice was aged. Orwic began to feel pity for him, and something akin to shame for his former rudeness.

Pkauchios left the throne and walking forward wearily took Orwic by the arm. His manner was of age that leaned on youth with perfect confidence.

"So, help me to that seat and sit beside me."

They sat down on a bench of carved ebony and Pkauchios leaned his back against the wall.

"Youth! Youth!" he said. "With all the world before you! Age must serve youth. We who have struggled and are old may justify ourselves if we can guide youth through the dangers. Age and responsibility! If I should guide you wrongly, what responsibility were mine! I will say nothing. It is wiser. I will not foreshadow destiny."

Now that was something like the druids' way of viewing interference with a man's own privilege of living as he sees fit. Orwic began to feel a vague respect for the Egyptian and to wonder whether he had not misjudged him. He might, after all, be a seer. It was hardly reasonable to suppose that all the prophets were in Britain. However, Orwic was still cautious.

"I don't believe in magic," he remarked.

"Rightly! Rightly so!" said Pkauchios. "It is destruction. It will destroy the Romans. It has ruined nations without number. Fools, who know no better, call me a magician. When I tell the truth to them, they weary me with their demands for untruth. It is restful to meet you. Honest unbelief is sweeter to me that the dark credulity of those who seek nothing but their selfish ends. Your incredulity will melt. Their superstition toughens as it feeds on vice. But I must crave your pardon. I am a laggard host, forgetting the body's needs in the absorption of a spiritual moment. You are hungry, I have no doubt."

He clapped his hands, and almost on the instant two slave girls appeared bearing trays heaped with refreshment. One of them washed Orwic's hands and combed his hair; the other spread before him milk, fruit, nuts, three sorts of bread, butter, honey and preserves, whose very scent excited appetite.

"I will return when you have refreshed yourself," said Pkauchios. "We who commune with the stars eat little earthly food."

He left the room, but the slave girls stayed and converted Orwic's first meal on foreign soil into an experience that melted his reserve.

He began by being half ashamed to eat while the Egyptian fasted, remembering that the druids hardly ate at all during their periods of spiritual commune with the universe. He began to be almost sure that fasting was a sign of the Egyptian's purity of purpose. It was incredible that such food as the slave girls set before him should not tempt a man with worldly motives—such as Orwic's own, for instance.

He began to confess to himself that he was having a glorious time, and he hoped Tros would not come for him too soon. Deeply though he admired Tros, loyal though he felt toward him, he dreaded Tros's abrupt way of dispersing dreams and scattering side issues. He could imagine Tros's contempt, for instance, for the slave girls. Orwic liked them.

Used to slaves and serving-women in his own land, he had never dreamed of such attentions as these two dark-haired women lavished on him. They were beautiful, smiling, silent, exquisitely trained, but that was not the half of it. In Britain guests were made to feel that their comfort was the host's one sole consideration, and the servants vied with one another to that end. But those two slave girls made a man feel that he owned them, that their very souls were his, that they would think his thoughts if he would only deign to half express them, and be overjoyed to be the mothers of his sons.

It was bewildering at first, embarrassing; then gradually rather pleasant; presently as natural as if all other forms of hospitality were crude, uncivilized and no part of a nobleman's experience. This was the way to live. It was no wonder that foreigners regarded Britons as barbarians, with their crude ideas of courtesy and the servants' air of being members of the family instead of servants in the true sense of the word.

One of the girls was on his knee when Pkauchios returned. She was wiping his mouth and moustache with a napkin. She removed herself in no haste, unembarrassed, curtseying to her master, helping the other girl at once to carry out the tray and dishes. Pkauchios took no notice of either of them, which seemed to Orwic to prove that the man was an aristocrat, if nothing else.

"You are right, you are right," said Pkauchios, taking a seat beside him. "You should have nothing to do with magic. It is safer to avoid true revelation than to listen to the false. But tell me why you came to Gades."

Orwic told him all of it; told him the whole story of how Cæsar had invaded Britain and had been repulsed; and how Tros of Samothrace, for friendship and because his ship was built in Britain, had undertaken to go to Rome and by any means that should present themselves to deter Cæsar from invading a second time.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" said Pkauchios when the tale was done and Orwic had finished his eulogiums of Tros. "All this and more I have seen written in the stars. You are a man of destiny. And yet—"

He leaned into the corner, frowning. It appeared that the decision between right and wrong, between his own high standard of integrity and a convenient alternative was forming in his brain.

"—if I should tell you what else I have seen—"

"Oh, you may as well tell me," Orwic interrupted. "I am not a child. And besides, I will do nothing without consulting Tros."

"Do you not see," said Pkauchios, "that if Hispania were to rebel against the Romans, Cæsar's army would be needed to prevent the Gauls from rising too?"

"Yes, that seems obvious," said Orwic. He was devoting at least half his attention to wondering where those slave girls were. The scent from the one who had sat on his knee still clung to his tunic. No British girls that he had known had ever smelled like that.

"And if Cæsar were to die," said Pkauchios.

He paused, aware that Orwic was only partly listening to him.

"And if Cæsar were to die," he repeated solemnly, then suddenly he gripped Orwic's arm and leaning forward, fixing him with penetrating gaze, almost hissed the words:

"Do you not see that you and Tros of Samothrace, with Hispania in red rebellion, north, south, east and west, could lead the insurrection into Gaul and stir the Gauls until they, too, rise against the Romans?"

He sat back again and sighed.

"All this," he said, "and more, I have seen written in the stars. Sight must be given us that we may see. And yet—"

"Such a deed would save Britain," remarked Orwic. He was thinking now.

He was still aware of the faint, delicious woman smell, but its effect on him was changing. There were thoughts of women whom a sword could win, quite other thoughts than Orwic was accustomed to, thoughts not exactly chivalrous but blended in with chivalry, suggesting that the rescue of the Gauls from Roman rule might lead to a delightful destiny. He began to wonder what Tros would have to say to the proposal and whether Tros, too, secretly, in the recesses of his heart, would not rather like the prospect of—well—of whatever victory might provide.

"I should not be surprised at anything," he said after a moment s pause. "When I left Britain it was to face my destiny, whatever it might be. Now that girl Chloe—is it true she is your slave?"

Pkauchios' answer was startling:

"Do you covet her? Shall I give her to you?"

It was almost too startling; it rearoused suspicion. Orwic eyed the Egyptian narrowly, turning over in his mind vague notions as to how much Chloe might be worth. He was not so stupid as to believe that offer genuine.

"If you should do what the stars indicate you safely may do," Pkauchios said mysteriously, "then by to-morrow's dawn you will be all-powerful in Gades. I shall need your friendship then. To flaming youth in the hour of victory, what gift could be more suitable than Chloe? I am an old man. Her beauty means nothing to me."

Orwic's veins began to boil, so, being British, he proceeded to look preternaturally wise.

"What is all this about destiny? What did you read in the stars?" he demanded.

"You would better not let me influence you," Pkauchios suggested. "I have never yet made one mistake in reading others' destiny, but I have no right!"

"Oh, nonsense! Out with it!" said Orwic. "If you can read my destiny, you have no right not to tell me."

"I must have your definite permission."

"You have it."

"Know then, that the stars have indicated for a month that this is the night when Balbus, Governor of Gades, dies! On this night, too, dies Cæsar, Imperator of the Roman troops in Gaul! But the conjunction of the stars is such that, if the Governor of Gades dies by the hand of a common murderer, as may be, then anarchy will follow and no good come of it. But should he die by the hand of the prince who stepped out of the red ship and was lost in Gades, then the prince shall wear a red cloak and shall rule a province."

"Strange!" said Orwic. "Strange! I have had peculiar dreams of late."

"How many men have you on board that ship?" asked Pkauchios. "If I should show you how to smuggle them ashore and where to hide them and how to reach Balbus' house unseen at midnight, and should tell you that in Balbus' treasury is money enough with which to recompense those men of yours and to pay others and to raise an army—"

"I am not a murderer. I am not a thief," said Orwic, his sense of self-restraint returning.

"Did you slay no Romans when they invaded Britain?" Pkauchios asked. "Did the Romans slay none of your friends? According to the stars that prince, who steps out of the red ship, is to be an avenger and shall drive the Romans out of Gaul!"

"Ah, now you are trying to persuade me," Orwic commented.

"Not I! But I will give you Chloe, if you seize your opportunity.

She is the richest prize in Gades. She is worth two hundred thousand sesterces."

Orwic had not the slightest notion how much money that was, so he magnified it in his own mind, and the result rearoused suspicion. He got up and began to pace the floor, to discover whether or not Pkauchios was proposing to detain him forcibly. But Pkauchios made no move; simply leaned against a corner of the wall and watched him. Orwic decided to probe deeper; he desired to justify temptation by proving to himself that Pkauchios was friend, not enemy. He drew back the curtains at the doorway by which he had entered the room. There was nobody there. He passed into a hall lined with statuary, entered rooms that opened to the right and left of it, found nobody, and tried the house door. It was unlocked; doves were cooing in the garden; fountains splashed; there were no lurkers; only a few old Egyptian slaves who dipped out water from a well a hundred yards away.

Plainly, then, he was not a prisoner. And as he breathed the incense smoke out of his lungs, refilling them with blossom-scented air, he felt the challenge of his youth and strength.

"Off Vectis, the Lord Druid said," he muttered to himself, "there is a man in Gades to whom he could have sent Tros, only that Tros's mind was closed against him. This Pkauchios is probably the man!"

Musing to himself, his hands behind him, he returned along the hall toward the room where he had left the old Egyptian. Chloe had said he should agree to anything the Egyptian should propose. It might do no harm to pretend to agree. But he wondered how he should explain away his rudeness, how he should accept the man's proffered aid now without cheapening his own position and above all, how he should explain to Tros.

"You must help me to convince the Lord Tros," he began, reentering the room.

But Pkauchios was gone. There was no trace of him nor any answer, though he called his name a dozen times.

CHAPTER LXXVI

BALBUS QUI MURUM ÆDIFICABIT

I believe it is true that people have the rulers they deserve. The very wise have said so. Nothing that I have seen has made me think the contrary.

Therefore, when I observe those rulers, is it insolence in me to hope that these, whom I rule, are a little worthier than some?

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Pondering the situation in all its bearings, Tros called Chloe back into the cabin while the deck crew lowered Simon into the longboat.

"Your Horatius Verres waits for Cæsar and is Cæsar's man. You have befriended Verres. Therefore Cæsar will befriend you. Why, then, should you be in haste to flee from Gades?"

"Torture!" she said and shuddered. "Horatius Verres sent a messenger who may reach Cæsar in time to warn him. But if Balbus dies and Cæsar comes, then Cæsar will investigate—"

"This is not his province. He has no authority in Hispania."

"He is Cæsar," Chloe answered. "And I shall be tortured, because Pkauchios will certainly be found out and they will need my evidence against him."

"So, unless we save Balbus' life—"

Chloe looked into Tros's eyes. She laid the palms of her hands against his breast, her lip quivering for a second—on the verge of tears, but struggling to regain her self-control.

"Lord Tros," she said, "there isn't a slave in Gades but knows Cæsar would jump at an excuse to invade Pompey's province. Pompey and Cæsar pretend to be friends. They're as friendly as two lovers of one woman! Balbus is Pompey's nominee, and he is willing to win Gaul for Pompey or to betray Hispania into Cæsar's hands, whichever of the two he thinks is stronger. All men know there will be war before long, and none can guess whether Pompey or Cæsar will win. Pompey is lazy, proud, rich, popular. Cæsar is energetic, loved, feared, hated, deep in debt."

"Wager your peculium on Cæsar!" Tros advised.

"Nay, on Horatius Verres! Have you ever loved a woman?" she asked.

Tros did not answer. He stroked his chin, watching her eyes. She asked him another question.

"Do you think it possible for me to tell the truth?"

He nodded. He expected a prodigious lie was coming. Her eyes were melting, soft, abrim with tears, held bravely back. The stage was all set for Gadean trickery. But she surprised him.

"I would die for Horatius Verres! I would submit to torture for him. But not for you, Pkauchios, Simon, Balbus, Cæsar nor any other man!"

"Pearls?" Tros asked her, studying her face.

She reached for the hem of her chlamys and produced the one pearl he had already given her, holding it out in the palm of her hand.

"You may keep them! Simon may keep my money unless you find a way of freeing me to-night! I will sing no more. I will dance no more and please none but myself. For they shall bury me where the other dead slaves' bodies rot if I lose Horatius Verres. Tros of Samothrace, if you have never loved a woman—"

"Come," said Tros.

The longboat set them on the seaweed-littered beach, where an officer of Balearic slingers, apeing Roman airs and very splendid in his clanking bronze, signed to Tros to pass on, but demanded to be told by what right Simon, the Jew, paid visits to a foreign ship in harbor. A party of Simon's slaves, with his great unwieldy, paneled litter in their midst had been detained some distance off, a detachment of slingers guarding them.

Simon began to argue excitedly, gesticulating, gasping as the nervousness increased his asthma. Chloe interrupted.

"Do you know me?" she asked.

"I pass you, exquisite Chloe!" the officer answered in Latin with an atrocious Balearic accent.

"I pass Simon!" she retorted. "Do you dare to prevent me?"

"But Chloe—"

"Bring me Simon's slaves or count me your enemy!" she interrupted.

With a half-humorous grimace the officer beckoned to his men to let Simon's slaves advance.

"Remember me, O favorite of Fortune!" he said to Chloe. "My name is Metellus."

"I will mention you to Balbus. I will lie to him about your good looks and your loyalty," she promised, and motioned to Simon to climb into his litter.

"Be your memory as nimble as your wits and feet!" Metellus answered, shrugging his shoulders and signing to his men to let the party pass.

Those Balearic slingers lined along the beach were a godsend from Tros's point of view. There was a crowd of hucksters, pimps, idlers and loose women noisily protesting because the soldiers would not let them approach the shore. In the distance where the fishing boats were anchored three liburnians patrolled the waterfront and kept small boats from putting out. There was no chance of communication with the ship, no risk of the crew getting drunk or of Jaun Aksue and his Eskualdenak escaping.

All the way to the city gate the road was lined with idlers who had come to stare and touts who heralded the fame of Gades' brothels. They praised Tros's purple cloak, admired his bulk and strength, flattered, coaxed and tried to tempt him with descriptions of alleged delights, pawing at him, pulling, fighting one another, spitting and cursing at Simon's slaves for thrusting the litter through their ranks. They offered horses, donkeys, mules, drink, women and at last a litter.

Tros hired the litter and bade Chloe climb into it and ride with him. But she refused.

"There are some things I can not do. Once I bought a litter. But it is against the law for a slave or even for freed women. The Romans' wives threatened to have me whipped. So I walk, and those women envy me my health, if nothing else!"

They were stared at by the gate guards and by the crowd that swarmed there, but not in any way molested. There was no wheeled traffic, but the narrow street was choked with burdened slaves, mules, oxen and leisured pedestrians who flowed in a colorful hot stream between the lines of stalls and booths that backed against the houses. There was a din of chaffering and a drone of flies where the fruit- and meat- and fish-shops made splurges of raw color; and there was a stench of overcrowded tenements that made Tros cough and gasp.

But people were less curious inside the city, and Chloe's presence had more effect. She walked ahead with one of Simon's slaves on either side of her, and the crowd made way, occasionally cheering, calling compliments, addressing her by name as if she were a free celebrity. One man, forcing his way through the crowd, presented her with flowers and begged her to ride in his chariot if he should win next month's quadriga race in the arena.

She nodded gaily and led on along the winding street until it widened suddenly and approached an irregular square with trees along one side of it and a statue of Balbus the Governor in the midst. On the left hand of the street, with its front toward the square, was a great white building with small, iron-barred windows and the legend S.P.Q.R. in enormous letters amid scroll work all along the coping. From the windows issued shrill, spasmodic, tortured woman's screams, increasing and increasing, until the street crowd set its teeth and some laughed nervously. It ceased abruptly, only to begin again.

There was no passing at that point. The crowd jammed the street. Even Chloe was helpless to force a way through, and while she pushed, coaxed, pleaded, argued, a girl younger than herself rushed out of a doorway fighting frantically with the crowd that interfered with her and, falling to her knees, seized Chloe's legs.

Her face was half hidden in a shawl; Chloe pulled it back and recognized her. The girl sobbed, and as the screams from the window rose to a shrill, broken summit of inflicted agony, she burst into a torrent of stuttering words all choked with sobs, her fingers clutching Chloe's knees.

Tros rolled out of the litter, for it was useless to try to force that eight-manned object through the crowd. He touched Chloe's shoulder.

"Her mother!" she whispered. "Some informer has told Balbus of a plot. He takes her mother's testimony."

She stooped and kissed the girl, then broke away from her and, beckoning to Tros to follow, began using violence and Balbus' name to force her way through, the crowd gradually yielding.

Around the corner, on the side of the building that faced the trees, eight Roman soldiers under a decurion leaned on spears beside the stone steps that led to a wide arched entrance. Beyond them, in the shadow of the wall, eight more legionaries stood guard over a group of miserable prisoners, gibing at them when they shuddered at the screams that could be heard there even more distinctly than in the street because the stone arch of the entrance magnified the noise. Held back by a rope between the steps and the trees at the back of the square was a crowd of Romans, Spaniards, Greeks, Moors, Jews, slaves and freemen, their voices making a sea of sound that paused regularly when the screams increased.

Chloe led Tros to the steps and whispered Balbus' name to the decurion in charge, who stared at Tros but nodded leave to enter. They fought their way into a crowded lobby, where men and women stood on tiptoe trying to see through the open courtroom door over the shoulders of two legionaries whose spears and broad backs blocked the way. There was hardly breathing room. A woman in a corner had fainted and a man was pouring water on her from a lion's mouth drinking fountain built into the wall.

Chloe kicked, shoved, imprecated, cried out Balbus' name and worked her way at last, with Tros behind her, until she touched the spears held horizontally across the door and Tros could see over her shoulder into the crowded courtroom.

The screams for the moment had ceased. On a sort of throne on a raised dais with a chair on either side of it on which the secretaries sat, was Balbus, Governor of Gades, exquisitely groomed, pale, clicking at his front teeth with a thumb-nail. He was handsome, but much darker than the average Roman; * there were rings under his eyes, that had a bored look, as if he found it difficult to concentrate on a subject that vaguely irritated him. His crisp black hair was turning gray, although he was a comparatively young man. He looked decidedly unhealthy.

Presently he sat bolt upright and the crowded courtroom grew utterly still. When he spoke his well-trained voice had the suggestion of a sneer, and his frown was a tyrant's, impatient, exacting, final—like the corners of his mouth that tightened when his lips moved.

"I have considered the advocate's argument. It is true, it is a principle of Roman law that no injustice shall be done; but this woman is not a Roman citizen, nor is she the mother of more than one child, so she has no rights that are involved in this instance.

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* Balbus was born in Africa.

Treason has been charged against the Senate and the Roman People, a most serious issue. This woman has refused to answer truthfully the questions put to her, although she has been accused of knowing the conspirators' names. Let the torturers continue. Apply fire."

He leaned forward, elbow on his knee, and again the awful screams began to fill the stone-roofed hall. A scream from the street reëchoed them. The crowd on the wooden benches reached and craned to get a better view and the sentries in the doorway stood on tiptoe; all that Tros could see over their shoulders was a glimpse of the men who held the levers of a rack and the red glow of a charcoal brazier. There began to be a stench of burning flesh.

Chloe stepped under the spears of the sentries; one of them reached out an arm but recognized her as she turned to threaten him, grinned and nodded to her to go wherever she pleased. She disappeared into the crowd that stood in the aisle between the benches. The next Tros saw of her she was in front of the dais, looking up at Balbus, who sat motionless, chin on hand, elbow on knee, apparently not listening. The tortured woman's screams made whatever Chloe said inaudible to any one but Balbus and, perhaps, his secretaries, who, however, were at pains to appear busy with their tablets.

Balbus suddenly sat upright, raising his right hand.

"Cease!" he exclaimed in a bored voice. "There will be a short recession. Remove the witness. Let the doctor see to her. After the recession I will examine the other witnesses in turn. It is possible we may not need this one's testimony."

The witness' screams died to a sobbing moan, and there was a murmur in the courtroom. Some one cried out, "Favoritism!" At the rear of the room there were audible snickers. Ushers and sentries roared for silence and, as two men carried the victim out on a stretcher through a side door, Balbus spoke with a metallic snarl:

"I will clear the court if there are further demonstrations! This is not a spectacle, but a judicial process. A courtroom is not an arena. Let decency attend the acts of justice. The next spectator who betrays disrespect for the dignity of Roman justice shall be soundly flogged!"

He arose and left the courtroom by a door at the rear of the dais, nodding to Chloe as he went. She seized a court official by the arm and the crowd in the aisle made way in front of them. The official, lemon-faced, his skin a mass of wrinkles, sly-eyed from experience of litigation and his long nose looking capable of infinite suspicion, beckoned to Tros. The sentries let him through and the crowd in the courtroom turned to stare as he swaggered up the aisle, his sea legs giving him a roll that showed off his purple cloak and his great bulk to advantage. With his sword in its purple scabbard and the broad gold band that bound his heavy coils of black hair he looked like a king on a visit of state and, what was more to his purpose, he knew it. They passed the torture-implements, where a Sicilian slave on his knees blew at a charcoal brazier in preparation for the next unwilling witness; the long-nosed official opened the door at the rear of the dais and Chloe, all smiles and excitement, led the way in.

"The renowned and noble Tros of Samothrace!" she exclaimed, and shut the door behind her, leaning her back against it.

Balbus looked up. He was sitting by the window of a square room lined with racks of parchments, holding toward the light a tablet, which he appeared to find immensely interesting. Tros approached him and bowed, hand on hilt.

"So you are that pirate?" said Balbus, looking keenly at him.

"That is Cæsar's view of it," Tros answered. "I had the great Pompeius' leave to come and go and to use all Roman ports, but Cæsar stole my father's ship and slew him."

"Why do you come to Gades?"

"To find a friend who shall make it safe for me to take my ship to Ostia, and there to leave the ship at anchor while I go to Rome."

"For what purpose?"

"To stir Cæsar's enemies against him; or, it may be, to persuade his friends of the unwisdom of his course. I hope to keep him from invading Britain."

"Who is this friend whom you propose to find in Gades?"

"Yourself, for all I know," said Tros, spreading his shoulders and smiling. "I offer *quid pro quo*. A friend of mine may count on me for friendship."

Balbus was silent for a long time, appearing to be studying Tros's face, but there was a look behind his eyes as if he were revolving a dozen issues in his mind.

"You took a hostage from me!" he said suddenly.

"Aye, and a good looking one!" Tros answered. "I was fortunate. You shall have him back when I leave Gades. I am told he knows your secrets."

"What if I hold you against him?" Balbus sneered; but he could not keep his eyes from glancing at Tros's sword.

Tros smiled at him.

"Why, in that case, my lieutenant would take my ship to Ostia. And I wonder whether that hostage, whom he will there surrender to the Romans, will keep your secrets as stoutly as the woman in the court just now kept hers!"

Balbus glared angrily, but Tros smiled back at him, his hand remaining on his sword-hilt.

"However, why do we talk of reprisals?" Tros went on after an awkward pause. "Balbus, son of Balbus, is it wisdom to reject a friendship that the gods have brought you on a western wind?"

Balbus looked startled, but tried to conceal it. Chloe, her back to the door, took courage in her teeth and interrupted in a strained voice:

"What said Pkauchios? A red ship with a purple sail? A bold man in a purple cloak?"

"Peace, thou!" commanded Balbus, but in another second he was smiling at her. "Chloe," he said, "you dance for me to-night?"

She nodded.

"As long as Pkauchios owns me."

Balbus stared at her, frowning:

"Pkauchios will never manumit you!" he said. "You know too many secrets."

Chloe bit her lip, as if she regretted having spoken, but her eyes were on Tros's face and appeared to be urging him to follow the cue she had given.

"Balbus, what if I should save your life?" Tros asked. "What then? Or shall I sail away and leave you?"

Again Chloe interrupted:

"Balbus! What said Pkauchios? What said the auguries? 'Death stalks you in the streets of Gades unless Fortune intervenes!'"

Balbus stared at Tros again.

"How come you to know about conspiracies in Gades?" he demanded.

"I, too, consult the auguries," said Tros. "For my ship's sake I read the stars as some men read a woman's eyes. The stars have blinked me into Gades. The very whales have beckoned me! My dreams for nine nights past in storms at sea have been of Gades and a man's life I shall save."

Balbus' lips opened a little and his lower jaw came slowly forward. He used his left hand for a shield against the sunlight streaming through the window and, leaning sidewise, peered at Tros again.

"You look like a blunt, honest seaman," he remarked, "save that you are dressed too handsomely and overbold!"

"My father was a prince of Samothrace," Tros answered; whereat Balbus shrugged his shoulders. It was no part of the policy of Roman governors to appear much thrilled by foreign titles of nobility.

Now Tros was utterly perplexed what course to take, for which reason he was careful to look confident. He knew the information he had from Chloe might be a net-work of lies. There might be no truth whatever, for instance, in her statement that Cæsar was on his way to Gades; on the other hand it might be true, and Balbus might be perfectly aware of it. Examining Balbus' eyes, he became sure of one thing—Balbus was no idealist; a mere suggestion of an altruistic aim would merely stir the man's suspicion.

"I come to fish in troubled waters," Tros remarked. "I seek advantage in your disadvantage."

Suddenly, as if some friendly god had whispered in his ear, he thought of the Balearic slingers on the beach and how readily their officer had yielded to Chloe's arrogant support of Simon. He remembered that shrug of the shoulders when she promised to praise him to Balbus.

"Are your troops dependable?" he asked, knowing that mutiny was as perennial as the seasons wherever Roman troops were kept too long in idleness. He began to wonder whether, perhaps, Balbus had not sent for Cæsar to help him out of an emergency. Secretaries, slaves might have spread such a rumor. Chloe might have magnified it and distorted it for reasons of her own; the Gades dancing girls, he knew, were capable of any intrigue. For that matter Horatius Verres might be Balbus' spy, not Cæsar's.

But Balbus' startled stare was more or less convincing. And it dawned on Tros that a Roman governor who felt entirely sure of his own authority would not yield so complacently to that hostage trick; a man with his nerve unshaken would have countered promptly by arresting Tros himself. Balbus was worried, nervous, trying to conceal the fact. Subduing irritation, he ignored Tros's question and retorted with another—

"You used Cæsar's seal! What do you know of Cæsar's movements?"

"None except Cæsar can guess what he will do next," Tros said, trying to suggest by his expression that he knew more than he proposed to tell.

"Word came," said Balbus, "that you fought a battle with his biremes. I have heard that the druids of Gaul report to you all Cæsar's moves in advance. Can you tell me where he is now? If you tell the truth, I will do you any favor within my power."

The pupils of Tros's amber eyes contracted suddenly. His head jerked slightly in Chloe's direction and Balbus took the hint.

"Chloe," he said, "go you to that woman who was tortured. Help to bandage her. Condole with her. Try to persuade her to confess to you the names of the conspirators who are plotting against my life. Tell her that if she confesses she shall not be tortured any more, and she may save others from the rack."

Chloe left the room, and Tros did not care to turn his head to see what effect the dismissal had on her.

"Now, what do you know of Cæsar?" Balbus asked.

Tros smiled. He was determined not to answer, until sure of where the forks of Balbus' own dilemma pricked. And the longer Tros hesitated the more confident Balbus grew that Tros knew more than he would tell without persuasion.

"You are Cæsar's enemy?" he asked.

Tros nodded.

"I am of the party of Pompeius Magnus," Balbus remarked, narrowing his eyes.

Tros nodded again.

"It would not offend Pompeius Magnus if—ah—if death should overtake Cæsar," Balbus remarked, and looked the other way.

"So I should imagine," Tros said, watching him.

Balbus stroked his chin. It had been beautifully shaven. Tros kept silence. Balbus had to resume the conversation:

"If Cæsar should visit Gades and should die, all Rome would sigh with relief; but the Senate would assert its own dignity by crucifying any Roman who had killed him. You understand me?"

Again Tros nodded. He was having hard work to suppress excitement, but his breath came regularly, slowly. Even his hand on the jeweled sword-hilt rested easily. Balbus appeared irritated at his calmness. He spoke sharply—

"But if an enemy of Cæsar slew him"— Tros passed his hand over his mouth to hide a smile—"that man would have a thousand friends in Rome!" Balbus went on. Then, after a moment's pause, his eyes on Tros, "Cæsar's corpse could harm no friends of yours in Britain!"

For as long as thirty breaths Tros and Balbus eyed each other. Then:

"Spies have informed me," said Balbus, "of a rumor that Cæsar intends to come here. What else than that news brought you into Gades? Did you not come to waylay and kill him?"

Tros assumed the slyest possible expression.

"I should need such guarantees of safety and immunity as even Balbus might find it hard to give," he remarked.

"We can discuss that later on," said Balbus. "Cæsar moves swiftly and secretly, but I know where he was three days ago. He can not be here for four or five days yet. We have time."

However, Tros remembered his friend Simon—probably already home by now and in abject terror awaiting news of the interview. Also he thought of Chloe. Those were two whose loyalty he needed to bind to himself, by all means and as soon as possible.

"I will make a first condition now," he said abruptly. "Simon, the Jew, owes money but can not pay. He says you owe him money and will not pay. Will you settle with Simon?"

Balbus looked exasperated.

"Bacchus!" he swore under his breath.

It needed small imagination to explain what situation he was in. Like any other Roman governor, he had been forced to send enormous sums to Rome to defray his own debts and to bribe the professional blackmailers who lived by accusing absentees before the Senate. He had not been long enough in Gades to accumulate reserves of extorted coin.

Tros understood the situation perfectly. He also knew how men in debt snatch eagerly at temporary respite.

"There is no haste for the money," he remarked. "Let Simon write an order on your treasury which you accept for payment, say, in six months' time."

Balbus nodded.

"That would be an unusual concession," he said, "from a man in my position. But I see no serious objection."

"Would any one in Gades dare to refuse to accept such a document in payment of a debt?" Tros asked him.

Balbus stiffened, instantly assertive of his dignity.

"Some men will dare almost anything—once!" he remarked. "It would be a dangerous indiscretion!"

"Even if it were the price of the manumission of a slave?"

"Even so."

"Very well," said Tros. "There is a female slave in Gades whom I covet. Can you order the sale of that slave to me?"

"Not so," said Balbus. "But I can order the slave manumitted at the price at which the owner has declared that slave for taxation purposes, and provided the slave pays the manumission tax of ten per cent. on her market value."

"I am at the age when a woman means more to me than money," Tros remarked.

Balbus nodded. That was no new thing. The dry smile on his face revealed that he thought he had Tros in the hollow of his hand.

"But how did you make the acquaintance of this slave in Gades?" he asked curiously.

Tros could lie on the spur of a moment as adroitly as he could change the ship's helm to defeat the freaks of an Atlantic wind.

"She was sold under my eyes in Greece, two years ago. I was outbidden," he answered promptly. "I learned she was brought to Gades and, if you must know, that is why I risked coming here. She is extremely beautiful. I saw her just now in the street."

"Do you know who owns her?"

"I will find out."

"Well," said Balbus, "make your inquiries cautiously, or her owner may grow suspicious and spirit her out of sight. You would better get her name and legal description, her owner's name and her taxable value, have the document drawn and bring it to me to sign before the owner learns anything about it."

"When? Where?" Tros asked him.

Balbus turned in his chair suddenly and looked straight into Tros's face, staring long and keenly at him.

"At my house. To-night," he said deliberately, using the words with emphasis, as a man might who was naming an enormous stake in a game of chance. "I bid you to my house to supper at one hour after sunset. There is an Egyptian named Pkauchios in Gades, an astrologer of great ability in the prediction of events. For two months he has predicted daily that Cæsar will die very soon by violence. Last night, between midnight and the dawn, he came to me predicting your arrival after sunrise. He prophesied that you shall serve me in a matter of life and death. I am thinking, if it should be my life and the death of Cæsar—"

"I must consult this Pkauchios!" said Tros, and Balbus nodded.

"I will send you to him."

"No," said Tros, "for then he will know I come from you. And if he has lied to you, he will lie to me. But if I go alone I may get the truth from him. I will not slay Cæsar unless I know the elements are all propitious."

"Go to him then," Balbus answered. "Make yourself as inconspicuous in Gades as you can. Bring me an exact account to-night of all that Pkauchios has said to you. I will sign the order for Simon's money and for the manumission of that slave girl just to let you feel my generosity. Thereafter, we will discuss the terms on which you shall—ah—shall—ah—act as the instrument of fate."

CHAPTER LXXVII

CONSPIRACY

Money? Aye, I need it. But has money brains, heart, virtue, intelligence, courage, faith, hope, vision? He who sets his course by money sees a false star. He who measures by it is deceived, and his measure is false wherewith he measures all else.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

THE litter Tros had hired had vanished when he left the courtroom. In its place was a sumptuous thing with gilded pomegranates at the corners of the curtained awning, borne by eight slaves in clean white uniform. An Alexandrian eunuch, who seemed to have enough authority to keep the crowd at bay, came forward, staff in hand, to greet Tros at the courthouse steps.

"My master the noble Pkauchios invites you," he said, bowing, gesturing toward the litter.

"Where is my own litter?" Tros demanded.

The eunuch smiled, bowing even more profoundly.

"My master would be ashamed that you should ride in such a hired thing to his house. I took the liberty in his name of dismissing it and paying the trifling charges."

Tros hesitated. He would have preferred to go first to Simon's house, supposing that the Jew had hurried home to wait for him, but as he glanced to left and right in search of Simon's litter the eunuch interpreted that thought.

"Simon the Jew is also my master's guest," he announced.

Tros disbelieved that. It was incredible that Simon should accept hospitality from a man whom he had so recently described as a vile magician. But the decurion in charge of the soldiers at the courthouse entrance nodded confirmation:

"Simon went to have his fatness charmed away," he suggested with a grin. "Pkauchios has a name for working miracles."

Reflecting that in any event he had better see Orwic as soon as possible, Tros rolled into the splendid litter. There was no sign of Chloe and he did not care to arouse comment by asking for her. He was borne away in haste, the soldiers shouting to the crowd to make way for the litter and, after a long ride through well-swept but fetid smelling streets, he was set down at Pkauchios' front gate, where the eunuch ushered him into the marble house, not announcing him, not entering the incense-smelling room with him, but drawing back the clashing curtains, motioning him through and closing them behind him.

He was greeted by Orwic's boyish laugh and by a gasp from Simon. The two were seated face to face on couches near the window, unable to converse since Simon knew hardly any Gaulish, and both of them as pleased to see Tros as if he were a meal produced by a miracle for hungry men. Orwic ran to greet him, threw an arm around him, trying to say everything at once in an excited whisper:

"A great wizard. This must be the man our Lord Druid might have sent you to if you had only listened—made me a proposal—slip the Eskualdenak ashore—he says he knows how to manage that—hide them in a place he'll show me—kill Balbus to-night—lead an uprising against the Romans—carry the rebellion into Gaul—no need then to go to Rome—we'll keep the Romans' hands too full to invade Britain!"

Tros snorted. One sniff was enough. There was a woman smell on Orwic's clothes.

"Magic works many ways," he remarked, and then thought of the curtains behind him. "We will consider the proposal," he added in a somewhat louder voice.

He approached Simon, who appeared too exhausted to rise from the couch and, glimpsing through the open window his great ship at anchor in the distance, he paused a moment, thrilled by the sight, before he spoke in Aramaic, his lips hardly moving, in an undertone that Orwic hardly caught:

"Out of the teeth of danger we will snatch success, but you must trust me. We speak now for an unseen audience."

He could feel the espionage, although there was no sign of it. He leaned through the open window, but no eavesdroppers lurked within earshot. He strode back to the curtains through which he had entered, jerked them back suddenly, and found the hall empty. There was another door a few feet from the throne with the arms of gilded ivory. He jerked back its curtains, too, and found the next room vacant, silent, beautifully furnished but affording no hiding place. There was a lute left lying by a gilded chair and the same smell of scented women that he had noticed on Orwic's clothes, but the wearers of the scent had vanished.

Nevertheless, he was convinced he was being spied on. He could feel the nervous tension that an unseen eye produces, and he suspected the wall at the back of the ivory throne might be hollow; the corner behind the throne was not square but built out, forming two angles and a short, flat wall. The canopy over the throne cast shadow, and there was a deal of decoration there that might conceal a peep-hole. He signed to Orwic to sit down by the window and, standing so that his voice might carry straight toward that corner wall, himself full in the sunlight, stroking his chin with an air of great deliberation, he spoke in Gaulish:

"It is good we may speak among ourselves before the Egyptian comes. What kind of man is he?"

"A nobleman!" said Orwic. "A good hater of the Romans! It was his slaves who rescued me from some ruffians in a mean street. He is not a false magician but a true one. He had prophesied the coming of your ship, and my landing by night and being lost in Gades. He has read our destiny in the stars and he refused, like a true magician, to say a word about it until I almost forced it out of him."

Tros nodded gravely.

"Then he made me that proposal. And I tell you, Tros, you would do well to consider it."

"I am an opportunist," Tros said. "I will do whatever fortune indicates."

"I objected to murdering Balbus," Orwic went on. "But the Romans invaded Britain. They killed our men. And he said Balbus is doomed anyhow but, according to his reading of the stars, if he should be killed by the prince from a far country who steps out of the ship with the purple sails, it will mean the end of Roman rule in all Hispania and Gaul. Whereas, if he is killed by a common murderer, no good will come of it."

Tros frowned. No trace of incredulity betrayed itself as he answered solemnly—

"Few men can read the stars with such precision."

"That is exactly my opinion," Orwic agreed. "He speaks like a Lord Druid."

Simon had made very little of the conversation, but he was watching Tros's face with a sort of blank expression on his own, as if his intuition rather than his ordinary faculties were working. He had suppressed his noisy breathing.

"Get me my money, Tros! Get me my money!" he gasped suddenly, noisily in Aramaic.

But his expression had changed and his eyes were brighter; Tros interpreted the remark to mean that Simon could see light at last. He answered him in Greek, speaking very proudly.

"I will put the illustrious Pkauchios to a test, as a man throws dice to solve a difficult decision. For I think that in such ways the gods are willing to indicate a proper course to us in our perplexity. If he shall grant me the first favor that I ask, and faithfully perform it, then I will let him guide me in this matter. But if he shall quibble with me or refuse or, having promised, fail to do what I shall ask, then no. So, let the gods decide!"

He made a gesture as of throwing dice and turned his back to the window, striding the length of the room with measured steps. He had paced the room three times before he saw Pkauchios standing in the doorway, not the doorway near the throne—the other one.

"I welcome you. Peace to you!" said Pkauchios in Greek. "But I foresee that you must snatch peace from the fangs of war!"

"I thank you for your courtesy," Tros answered, bowing.

He did not bow so deeply that his eyes left Pkauchios' face. He hated the man instantly, and hid the hatred under a mask of eager curiosity.

The magician's dark eyes seemed to be trying to read into his very soul, but Tros knew nothing better than that men of genuine spiritual power are careful never to display the outward signs of it and, above all, never to distress strangers with a penetrating stare. The astrologer's robes and the air of superhuman wisdom were convincing, but not of what Pkauchios intended. The Egyptian spoke again pleasantly, with the air of a wiseman condescending:

"I regret I should have kept you waiting, but I observed the flight of birds, from which much may be foretold by those who understand natural symbology. Why do you come to Gades?"

"You are a magician. You should know why I came," Tros answered.

"And indeed I do know. But I see there is a question in your mind," said Pkauchios.

The pupils of the Egyptian's eyes contracted into bright dots. He made a gesture with his hand before his eyes, brushing away veils of immaterial obscurity.

"Doubt? Or desire? One blended with the other, or so it seems. You have a request to make," he went on. "Speak then, while the vision holds me."

He had not moved. He was standing before the curtains like a dignified attendant at the door of a mystery.

"There is a slave," said Tros, "who at great risk brought me information. Speak for me to Balbus that he manumit that slave."

"I will," said Pkauchios, without a second's hesitation. "Whose is the slave?"

"Do you or do you not see that the slave should be set free?" Tros countered.

"I see it is just and can be accomplished. But how shall I urge Balbus unless I know the slave's name and his master's?" Pkauchios answered.

"Speak to him thus—" said Tros. "'It would be well if you should order manumitted whichever slave Tros the Samothracian indicates.'"

"It shall be done," said Pkauchios. But he did not quite retain his self-command. There was a twitching of the face muscles, a discernible effort to conceal chagrin.

Tros did not dare to glance at Simon or at Orwic. He was so sure now that the Egyptian had been spying through an eye-hole in the wall behind the throne, that he would have burst out laughing if he had not bowed again and backed away, biting his lower lip until the blood came. That gave him an excuse to break the tension.

"Blood?" he exclaimed, frowning, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and examining it.

"Aye, blood!" said Pkauchios in a hollow voice and walked in front of him to near where Orwic sat.

By the window he turned and, after greeting Simon with a stare and a gesture of condescension, spoke again:

"Blood! Mars with Saturn in conjunction! And a red ship on the morning tide! The blood must flow in rivers-full! But whose?"

He stared at Simon balefully until the Jew in nervous resentment gaped at him and tried to force himself to speak, but failed because the asthma gripped his throat.

"I know your danger!" Pkauchios remarked. "There are weapons in your warehouse—"

"Yours!" Simon interrupted, pointing a fat finger at him. "You—"

The Egyptian cut him short.

"Jew! Have a care! You come to me for help, not for recrimination. At a word from me you would be tortured with the rack and charcoal. Rob not opportunity!"

Tros kept staring through the window at his great ship in the distance. She summoned to the surface all the mysticism in him and he muttered lines from Homer as he gazed. The blind poet who once dwelt on rocky Chios, when he stamped on to the racial memory that character of crafty, bold Odysseus, hymned a hero after Tros's own heart. The Egyptian seemed to read the tenor of his thought.

"Tros of Samothrace," he said, turning his back on Simon, "you have impelled yourself into a vortex of events. You—your ship—your friends—your crew—are all in danger. Win or lose all! Forward lies the only road to safety!"

"It appears you have a plan," said Tros. "Unfold it."

The Egyptian nodded.

"We are few who can interpret destiny, but to us is always given means with which to guide events. I have awaited you these many days."

"I am here," said Tros.

"And you have men with you! You will sup to-night with Balbus; that I know, for I advised him to invite you. Listen. There is a quarry close to Balbus' house where you can hide your men. There is a wall between the quarry and the house, where no guards are ever posted. It is easy to scale that wall from the side of the quarry. It is simple to bring unarmed slaves into the city. It is easy to bribe Balearic slingers to see and to say nothing after darkness has set in. There are weapons in Simon's warehouse. There is only a small guard at Balbus' house at night—not more than twenty or thirty men. You have, I think, two hundred and fifty men who could hide in the quarry and at a signal overwhelm the guard."

Simon was growing restless, trying to catch Tros's eye and warn him against being caught in any such network of intrigue, but Tros trod on his foot to signal to him to keep still. Orwic, who knew no Greek, was walking about the room examining strange ornaments. The Egyptian after a pause continued:

"Balbus, who envies Cæsar, has sent emissaries into Gaul to murder him! Hourly he awaits the news of Cæsar's death! The stars, whose symbolism never lies, inform me that Cæsar is already dead, and the news will reach Gades to-night! But if Balbus lives, he will blame others for the murdering of Cæsar. Therefore, Balbus shall die, too!"

Tros nodded. Not a gesture, not a line of his face suggested that he knew it was the Egyptian himself who had sent slaves to murder Cæsar. His lion's eyes were glowing with what might have been enthusiasm. He stood, hands clenched behind him, making no audible comment.

"It is expedient that Balbus shall die to-night," said Pkauchios. "He has received word of a conspiracy against him. Sooner or later a witness in the agony of torture will reveal names. The conspirators are fearful; they lack leadership. But if Balbus were slain, the whole city would rise in rebellion! I have a plan that at the proper moment will draw away the legionaries from the camp outside the city."

He paused, and then dramatically raised his voice:

"By morning messengers will have gone forth summoning all Hispania to rise. Good leadership—and I, Pkauchios, will guide you, Tros of Samothrace—good, ruthless leadership! Hispania and Gaul will throw off Roman rule!"

Tros grinned. He had made his mind up, which is a difficult thing to do in the teeth of an expert in personal magnetism. He succeeded in convincing even Simon.

"Well and good," he said, folding his arms. "But I will not kill Balbus until he has set that slave free and has repaid Simon what he owes."

"Those two preliminaries granted?" said the Egyptian.

He seemed quite sure that Tros had committed himself.

"Orwic shall smuggle my men into the city if you show him how," said Tros, "and at the proper signal. But who shall give the signal?" he asked.

He was wary of definite lying. Any promises he made he liked to keep. But he had no objection to the Egyptian's deceiving himself.

"I will give the signal," Pkauchios answered. "Let brazen trumpets peal the death of Balbus! Six trumpets shall clamor a fanfare on the porch. Then plunge your dagger in!"

"Where will you be?" Tros asked him.

"At the banquet. Where else? Behold me. I rise from the banqueting couch. I stand thus to announce an augury. My servant, squatting by the door, will watch me, and when I raise my right hand thus, he will pass out to the porch where the trumpeters will be waiting who are to make music for the midnight dance Chloe has invented. The fanfare resounds. Your men come swarming over the quarry wall. Your dagger does its work—and—and you may help yourself, if you wish, from Balbus' treasury!"

Tros acted so immensely pleased that Orwic came and wondered at him. Simon hove himself off the couch at last and clutched Tros's arm.

"Tros, Tros!" he gasped. "Don't do this dog's work! Don't! You will ruin all of us!"

Scowling, Pkauchios opened his thin lips to rebuke and threaten the Jew, but checked himself as he saw the expression on Tros's face. Tros took Simon by the arms, driving his fingers into the fat biceps, the only signal that he dared give that his words need not be taken at face value.

"Simon!" he exclaimed in a voice of stern reproach. "You owe me money! Yet you dare to keep me from this golden opportunity? Fie on you, Simon!"

Simon wrung his hands. Tros turned to Orwic.

"Go you to the ship," he said. "Our friend here, the Egyptian, will provide you a guide to the beach. Talk with Jaun Aksue. Tell him all the Eskualdenak shall come ashore to-night under your leadership, and do a little business of mine before I turn them loose to amuse themselves. Say they shall be well paid. Make them understand they must be sober until midnight. I will come to the ship later and explain the details of the plan. Go swiftly."

CHAPTER LXXVIII

THE COMMITTEE OF NINETEEN

I am not wise. I seek wisdom. But I know this: tyranny is never slain by slaying tyrants. Let valiance first slay tyranny in its victims' hearts. Tyrants then will die of being laughed at, quicker than any hangman could make an end of them.

But a man must begin at beginnings. I have not yet learned to laugh at tyranny. I hate it.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

It approached high noon. Simon had left an hour ago in a sort of wet-hen flutter of indignant misery, with a threat from the Egyptian in his ear:

"Jew! Balbus owes you money. He would welcome excuse to proscribe you and seize your property! One word from me—"

Thereafter Pkauchios held Tros in conversation, seeking to make sure of him, promising him riches should the night's attempt succeed and more than riches, "power, which is the rightful perquisite of honest men!" Too shrewd to threaten, he nevertheless dropped hints of what might happen if Tros should fail him.

"You are not the first. Man after man I have tested. One fool tried to betray me, and was crucified. My word with Balbus outweighed his! Another thought he could do without me, after I had made all ready for him. Those he would have led to insurrection burned his house and threw him back into the flames as he ran forth in his night clothes. No, no, you are not the first!"

"I am the last!" Tros answered grimly, and Pkauchios' dark eyes took on a look of satisfaction. Then Tros tried to find out where Chloe was without arousing Pkauchios' suspicion.

"Who was that woman," he asked, "who came out to my ship?"

"Oh, a mischievous Greek slave. A very clever dancer who will perform to-night for Balbus."

"Trustworthy?" Tros suggested.

"No Gades dancing girls are trustworthy. Theirs is the very religion of intrigue."

"Ergastulum?" Tros suggested.

"No. She sleeps to be ready for to-night."

However, there was plainly a mask over Pkauchios' thought. Tros was quite sure he was lying, equally sure he was worried. All sorts of fears presented themselves that Tros was hard put to it to keep from showing on his face. Chloe might have disappeared, turned traitress. He decided he was a fool to have left Horatius Verres at large on the ship. If Chloe loved that spy of Cæsar's—or was he Balbus' spy, pretending to be Cæsar's?—then she would quite likely do whatever Verres told her and perhaps betray every one, Pkauchios included.

Yet he decided not to return to the ship until he had spoken alone with Simon. The old Jew was possibly the weakest link in the intrigue. In terror he might run to Balbus and betray the whole plot. Before all else he must reassure Simon.

Pkauchios ordered out the litter with the eunuch in attendance and the eight white-liveried slaves. Tros saw him whisper to the eunuch, but pretended not to see. He had contrived to look entirely confident when the Egyptian walked with him to the garden gate.

"After sunset," said Pkauchios, "there will go a messenger to the gate guards who will bid them admit two hundred and fifty slaves on the excuse that they are needed as torchbearers for the midnight pageant in Balbus' garden. They will be shown a writing to that effect which the fools will think is genuine. Another messenger will go to the Balearic guards who line the beach. And he will take money with him, a considerable bribe. At sunset a great barge will be rowed alongside your ship. Put your men into that. They shall be led to Simon's warehouse where they may help themselves to weapons. And the same guide will lead them afterward to the quarry outside Balbus' garden. He will lead them by roundabout ways so as not to attract attention."

Tros rolled into the litter and allowed the eunuch to lead as if his first objective were the ship. But he had no intention of being spied on by that eunuch, and when the litter halted at a narrow passage in the street to let three laden mules go by he rolled out of it again.

"Wait for me by the city gate," he commanded.

The eunuch demurred, tried persuasion, offered to carry him anywhere, and at last grew impudent.

"You insult my master's hospitality!"

A crowd began to gather, marveling at Tros's purple cloak and at the broad gold band across his forehead. The eunuch tried to drive them away, fussily indignant, prodding with his staff at those who seemed least likely to retaliate, but the crowd increased. Tros felt a tug at his cloak and, glancing swiftly, caught his breath. He saw Conops slip out of the crowd and go sauntering along the street! His red cap was at a reckless angle and his bandy legs suggested the idle, erratic, goalless meandering of a sailor in a half-familiar port.

Tros climbed back into the litter promptly as the best means of escaping from the crowd. Conops, faithful little rascal, would never have left the ship without good reason. Clearly he expected to be followed. The eunuch contrived to clear the way and the crowd dispersed about its business, which was mainly to sit in doorway shadows. As the litter began to overtake Conops he increased his pace until, where five streets met, he turned up an alley and turned about to watch. He made no signal.

Making sure that Conops was not following the litter downhill toward the city gate, Tros vaulted to the ground and had made his way to the alley mouth before the eunuch, walking rapidly ahead to clear the way, realized what was happening.

"This way, master—swiftly!"

Conops opened a door ten paces down the alley and Tros followed through it. The door slammed behind him and in stifling gloom he was greeted by a laugh he thought he recognized. It was nearly a minute before definite objects began to evolve out of shadows. He could hear a rasping cough that seemed familiar, and there were other noises that suggested the presence of armed men, but the sunlight had been dazzling on the whitewashed walls and there were no open windows in the place in which he found himself. It took time for eyesight to readjust itself. The first shape to evolve out of the darkness was a stairhead, leading downward; then, down the stairs a leather curtain of the rich old-golden hue peculiar to Hispania. Above the curtain, on a panel of the wall the stairway pierced, was a painted picture of a bull's head; and there was something strange about its eyes. After a moment's stare Tros decided there were human eyes watching him through slits in the painted ones. There was a murmur of voices from behind the curtain and, every moment or two, that sound of labored breathing and a cough that resembled Simon's.

Conops was in no haste to explain. He slunk behind Tros in the darkness, and a man stepped between them in response to a thundering on the street door. He opened a peep-hole and spoke through it to Pkauchios' eunuch; Tros could see him clearly as the light through the hole shone on his face—a lean, intelligent, distinguished looking man. He assured the eunuch in good Greek that he was mistaken. None had entered the house recently. Perhaps the next house or the one over the way. Finally, he advised the eunuch to wait patiently.

"People who vanish usually reappear unless the guards have seized them. Private business or perhaps a woman, who knows? At any rate, I will trouble you not to disturb a peaceful household. Go away!"

He closed the peep-hole and in the darkness Tros could sense rather than see that he bowed with peculiar dignity.

"Do me the favor to come this way," he murmured, using the Roman language in as gentle a voice as Tros had ever heard.

He led down the dark stairs as if they were not quite familiar to him.

Tros groped for Conops, seized him by the neck and swung him face to face.

"Well?" he demanded.

Conops answered in a hurried whisper:

"That fellow Horatius Verres came out of the hold and said 'If you value your master's freedom, follow me!' Then he jumped overboard and swam. I followed to the beach in a boat. All the way to this place he kept a few paces ahead of me. Then he said 'Find your master and bring him here, or he'll be dead by midnight!' I was on my way to Pkauchios' house when—"

"Go ahead of me!" Tros ordered.

He loosed his sword in the scabbard and trod quietly, hoping Conops' heavier step would be mistaken for his own in the event of ambush, so leaving himself free to fight. But the curtain was drawn aside, only to reveal a dim lamp and another curtain. The sound of men's voices increased; there was now laughter and a smell of wine. Beyond the second curtain was a third with figures on it done in blue and white. Some one pulled the third curtain aside and revealed a great square room whose heavy beams were set below the level of the street. The walls were of stone, irregularly dressed. There was a tiled floor covered with goat-hair matting, and a small table near one end of the room, at which a man sat with his back to a closed door. Around the other walls were benches occupied by men in Roman and Greek costume, although none of them apparently was Roman and by no means all were Greeks. There were two Jews, for instance, of whom one was Simon. All except Simon rose as Tros entered. Simon seemed exhausted, and was sweating freely from the heat of the bronze illuminating lamps.

"The noble Tros of Samothrace!" said the man with the gentle voice who had led the way downstairs.

Tros glared around him, splendid in his purple cloak against the golden leather curtain, and the man at the table bowed. Simon coughed and made movements with his hands, suggesting helplessness. He who had led the way downstairs produced a chair made of wood and whaleskin and with the air of a courtier offered it to Tros to sit on, but he pretended not to notice it.

"Illustrious Tros of Samothrace, we invite you to be seated," said the man at the table.

He looked almost like Balbus, except that his face was harder and not wearied from debauch of the emotions. He had humor in his dark eyes, and every gesture, every curve of him suggested confidence and good breeding.

Tros noticed that Horatius Verres was seated in the darkest corner of the room, that Conops' knife-blade was a good two inches out of the sheath, that his own sword was at the proper angle to be drawn instantly, and that the men nearest to him looked neither murderous nor capable of preventing his escape past the curtain.

"Illustrious Tros of Samothrace," said the man at the table, "we have learned that you will lend your dagger to the cause of Gades."

"Who are you?" Tros retorted bluntly.

"We are a committee of public safety, self-appointed and here gathered, unknown to our Roman rulers, for the purpose of conspiracy in the name of freedom," he at the table answered. "My own name is Quintilian."

Tros heard a noise behind the curtain, was aware of armed men on the stairs. By the half smile on the chairman's face he realized he was in a trap from which there was no chance of escape without a miracle of swordsmanship or else a shift of luck. He stared very hard at Simon, who seemed to avoid his gaze.

"We wish to assure ourselves," said the man who had called himself Quintilian, "that we have not been misinformed."

"There are two who might have told you," Tros answered. "One is Simon, the other Chloe, a Greek slave. I will say nothing unless you tell me which of them betrayed me."

Quintilian smiled. His dark, amused eyes glanced around the room, resting at last on Simon's face.

"Your friend Simon," he said, "has refused to answer questions. We are pleased that your arrival on the scene may save him from that application to his person of inducements to speak, which we had in contemplation."

Tros blew a sigh out of his lungs, half of admiration for his old friend Simon, half of contempt for himself for having trusted Chloe. Then he glared at Horatius Verres over in the corner.

"How came I to trust you?" he wondered aloud.

"I don't know," the Roman answered, smiling. "I myself marveled at it. I am greatly in your debt, illustrious Tros. You gave me opportunity to hold a long conversation with Herod ben Mordecai down in the dark, in the hold of your ship. And you left me free to watch for signals from the shore. You knew that Chloe loves me. I am sure you are much too wise to suppose that a woman in love would neglect to signal to her lover." The voice was mocking, confident, cynical.

Tros tossed his head as if about to speak, staring straight at the man at the table to conceal his intention of charging up the stairs and fighting his way to the street. Up anchor and away from Gades—there was nothing else to do! The only thing that made him hesitate was wondering how to rescue Simon.

"You are in no danger at present. Be seated," said Quintilian courteously. "We wish to hear from your lips confirmation of a plot that interests us deeply. We also are conspirators."

Tros closed his mouth grimly.

He did not sit down, but laid his left hand on the chair-back, intending to use the chair as a shield when he judged the moment ripe.

"Ah, you have not understood us properly," said Quintilian. "Trouble yourself to observe that we are not warlike men, not even armed with anything but daggers. We are students of philosophy, of music, of the sacred sciences. Our purpose is, that Gades shall become a center of the arts, a city dedicated to the Muses. We have heard that Pkauchios the Egyptian plans an uprising which you will lead by slaying Balbus, for whom none of us has any particular admiration. In the interests of Gades we propose to discover in what way we can be of assistance to you."

Tros let a laugh explode in one gruff bark of irony.

"I am no friend of Balbus. I am the enemy of Cæsar and of Rome," he answered. "But if I were so far to forget my manhood as to cut a throat like a common murderer, it would be the throat of Pkauchios! You fools!"

"Not so foolish, possibly, as weak!" Quintilian answered with a suave smile. "But as the poet Homer says, 'The strength even of weak men when united avails much!' "

The mention of the poet Homer mollified Tros instantly. He began to feel a sort of friendly condescension. These were harmless, poet-loving people after all. They might be saved from indiscretion.

"Fools, I said! But I, too, have been foolish. I thought to pluck my own advantage from the whirlpool of this city's frenzy! Murder never overthrew a tyranny. Ye are like dogs who bite the stick that whips them instead of fighting foot and fang against the tyranny itself! Slay Balbus, and a tyrant ten times worse will take advantage of the crime to chain a new yoke on your necks!"

There was a murmur of surprise. Quintilian raised his eyebrows and, leaning both elbows on the table, answered—

"But we know for a fact you have agreed with Pkauchios to stab Balbus in his house at the supper—to-night."

"Chloe told you. Well, I, too, was fool enough to trust her, but not altogether," Tros said, grimly. "I would not trust Pkauchios if I had him tied and gagged! My plan was nothing but to rescue Balbus, to protect him, and so win his gratitude! I seek a favor from him. Bah! Do you think I would lend my men for a purpose that would bring disaster on a city against which I have no grudge? *Phaugh!* Murder your own despots, if you will, but count me out of it! Look you—"

He drew his sword and shook the cloak back from his shoulder. Behind him he heard the click of Conops' knife emerging from the sheath.

"I go!" He took a stride toward the door, but as none moved to prevent him he paused and faced Quintilian again. He decided to test them to the utmost. If he had to fight his way out he proposed to know it. "Simon may come if he will. I have two words of advice for you: Kill me if you can before I gut your men who guard the stairs, because I go to Balbus! I will warn him, for the sake of Gades! Fools! If you must murder some one, make it Pkauchios! If that dark trickster has his way, all Hispania and Gaul will run blood! You have let the Romans in and now you must endure the Romans! Make no worse evil for yourselves than is imposed already!"

He beckoned to Simon, but Quintilian rose and bowed with such dignity and obvious good-will that Tros paused again.

"Illustrious Tros," Quintilian said, "if you could favor us with any sort of guarantee that those are your genuine sentiments, we would even let you go to Balbus! It is just Balbus' death that we hope to prevent!"

Smiling, his dark eyes alight with amusement and with something strong and generous behind that, he struck the table sharply with the flat of his hand. There was a sudden sound behind Tros's back; the inner curtain had been drawn; in the opening stood two men armed with javelins, and there was a third behind them with a bow and arrows.

"You may live and we will turn you loose if you will convince us," remarked Quintilian. "Time presses. Won't you do us the favor to be seated?"

But Tros refused to sit.

"It is you who must convince me!" he retorted.

With his cloak, his sword, the whaleskin chair and Conops to create diversions, he knew himself able to defeat javelins and bow and arrow, but he was interested to discover whether there were any more armed men in hiding. Quintilian, however, gave him no enlightenment on that point beyond continuing to smile with utmost confidence.

"You see," he said, "none of us can go to Balbus, who is altogether too suspicious. He would have us crucified for knowing anything about conspiracies. Yet we have suffered so much in pocket and peace and dignity from former abortive risings that we ventured to take liberties with you in order to nip a new one in the bud, or rather, to prevent its budding. Balbus and his troops would nip!"

"Then his troops aren't mutinous?" Tros asked.

Quintilian smiled.

"They are always mutinous. Just now they talk of marching to join Cæsar in Gaul. But a chance to loot the city would restore them to sweet reasonableness, as Balbus perfectly understands. Illustrious Tros, perhaps we might not feel so determined if we liked Pkauchios or if we thought the city were united. We believe ourselves sufficiently intelligent to take advantage of the disaffection in the Roman camp. The moment might be ripe for insurrection but for one important fact: We have learned that Julius Cæsar is coming!"

He glanced at Horatius Verres, who smiled at Tros and nodded with the same air of amused confidence that he had displayed from the beginning.

"Speak to him," said Quintilian. So Horatius Verres stood up, arms folded, and in a very pleasant voice explained how he came to be there.

"Illustrious Tros," he said, "I am in a worse predicament than you, I being Cæsar's man, and you your own. I obey Cæsar, because I love him. While I live, I serve him at my own risk, whereas you are free to follow inclination. I discovered a plot to murder Cæsar. It was launched in Gades, and I sent him warning as soon as I knew.

"I received a reply that he will come here. But though he is

Cæsar, he can not be here for several days, whether he come by land or water. I can not warn Balbus, who is touchy about being spied on and would have my head cut off to keep me from telling Cæsar things I know. But it is not Cæsar's desire that Balbus should meet death, there being virtues, of a sort which Balbus imitates, that might serve Cæsar's ends to great advantage.

"From Herod, the Jew, in the darkness of the hold of your ship, I learned of these distinguished Gadeans, who call themselves a committee of public safety. So I risked my life by coming to them, and I risked yours equally, by persuading your man Conops to summon you, believing you to be a man who might see humor in the situation and take the right way out of it."

He sat down again.

"May the gods behold your impudence!" said Tros. But he could not help liking the man.

"We know," said Quintilian, "that Pkauchios has ruffians ready to attack Balbus' house at midnight. We also know that he has bribed some of the bodyguard, and we suppose he will make some of the others drunk with drugged wine. We imagine he has offered you inducements to bring a few hundred men ashore—"

"You had that from Chloe," said Tros, but Quintilian took no notice of the interruption.

"—to give backbone, as it were, to the mob that might otherwise flinch. And we know there are weapons in Simon's warehouse, some of which we presume are to be supplied to your men. We ourselves might kill Pkauchios, but Balbus has a great regard for him and, strange though it may appear, though public-spirited, we prefer not to be tortured and we object to having our possessions confiscated. Nevertheless, we will not permit Balbus to be slain, and if you are willing to protect him for the sake of Gades—"

He paused and Tros waited, almost breathlessly. In his mind he made a bargain, named the terms of it by which he would abide for good or ill—a final test of these men's honesty.

"We will offer you our silent gratitude," Quintilian went on, "and we will take a pledge from you not to reveal our names or our identity to Balbus."

It was a tactful way of saying they would not murder him if he succeeded and provided he should keep his mouth shut. Tros laughed.

"If you had offered me a price," he said, "I would have spat on you."

"As it is, are you willing to betray Pkauchios to Balbus?" Quintilian asked. "You could do it without risk whereas we—"

Tros snorted.

Quintilian smiled with a peculiar, alert, attractive wrinkling of his face and glanced around the room. Men nodded to him, one by one.

"Had you agreed to betray Pkauchios, we would have known you would betray us!" he said. "Illustrious Tros, what help can we afford you? We are nineteen men."

"See that Cæsar doesn't catch me when he comes!" Tros announced. "Keep me informed of the news of his movements." He looked hard at Horatius Verres. "You," he said, "will you keep me informed? Your Cæsar is my enemy, but I befriended you."

"I know no more than I have told you," Verres answered.

Once again Tros hesitated. Impulse, sense of danger urged him to escape while it was possible. It would be easy to make these men believe he would go forward with the plan, then to return to his ship ostensibly to instruct his own men for the night's adventure. Orwic was on board. He could sail away and leave Gades to stew in its own intrigues.

But obstinacy urged the other way. He hated to withdraw from anything he had set his hand to before the goal was reached. And again he remembered the Lord Druid's admonition, "Out of the midst of danger thou shalt snatch the keys of safety!"

While he hesitated, the door behind Quintilian opened. He recognized the hand before the woman came through, knew it was Chloe without looking at her, looked, and knew she held the keys of the whole situation. There was triumph in her eyes, although she drooped them modestly and stood beside Quintilian's table with hands clasped in an attitude of reverence for the august assembly.

"Speak!" Quintilian commanded, and she looked at Tros, her eyes alight with impudence.

"Lord Tros," she said, "would you have come here of your own accord? Would you have come, had I invited you? Would you not have sailed away, if you had known these noblemen would kill you rather than permit you to kill Balbus? And do you think I propose to lose those pearls you promised me, or my freedom?"

She nodded and smiled.

"Do you think I intend to be tortured?"

There was a long pause, during which everybody in the room, Quintilian included, looked uncomfortable. Then she answered the thought that was making Tros's amber eyes look puzzled:

"These noblemen don't kill me because they know there are others who know where I am, who would go straight to Balbus and name names. It would deeply interest Balbus to learn of a committee of nineteen who propose to direct the destiny of Gades unbeknown to him! It was not I who told these nobles of your plot with Pkauchios. There is one of this committee—illustrious Quintilian, shall I name him?"

Quintilian shook his head.

"There is one in this room who pretends to be Pkauchios' friend and whom Pkauchios trusts. It was he who told. To save your life I signaled to the ship, and when Horatius Verres hurried through the streets I whispered to him so that he knew where to come."

"Who told him to persuade Conops to come?" Tros demanded, not more than half believing her. But Verres himself answered that question:

"Cæsar does not select agents who are wholly without wits," he remarked in his amused voice. "Chloe signaled, which she would not have done if all went well. Suspecting that you might be causing her trouble I proposed to myself to bring a hostage with me, whose danger might bring you to reason. I had observed that you value your man Conops. So I hinted to him that your life was in danger, and of course he followed me, being a good faithful dog. Chloe reached this place ahead of us, and when she whispered to me again through the hole in the door, I sent Conops to find you. Is the mystery explained?"

"You are a very shrewd man," Tros answered. "But why did you tell these noblemen that Cæsar is on the way?"

"To confirm them in their resolution not to let Balbus be slain.

It might not suit Cæsar to find Gades in rebellion. You see, this is not his province and it is not certain what the troops would do. If he should assume command here, it might stir Pompey to go before the Senate and demand Cæsar's indictment and recall to Rome."

All the while Verres was speaking Chloe whispered to Quintilian. Her hand was on his arm and she was urging him. Suddenly Quintilian sat upright and rapped with his hand on the table.

"Time presses," he said. "Comrades, we must come to a decision. Shall we trust the illustrious Tros and take a pledge from him?"

There was a murmur of assent.

"A pledge?" said Tros. "From me?"

"Why, yes!" said Chloe. "We think you are an honorable man, but at a word from you to Balbus we might all be crucified!"

The men in the doorway behind Tros rattled their weapons.

"We all risk our lives if we give you liberty," Quintilian remarked. "You are a stranger to us."

Tros began to turn over in his mind what pledge he could deposit with them. There was no alternative except to fight his way out to the street, and he suspected now that there were more than three men on the stairs. Quintilian enlightened him:

"You would have seven men to fight, besides ourselves. But why fight? Why not leave your faithful follower with us?"

Conops drew breath sharply. Tros turned his head to glance at him.

"Little man," he said, "shall we fight?"

"Nay, there are too many," Conops answered.

For a fraction of a second Conops' face wore the reproachful look of a deserted dog's. But he saw Tros's eyes and recognized the resolution in them. Never, in all their long experience together, had Tros looked like that at him and failed.

"You are not such a fool as you look!" Conops sneered, staring straight at Quintilian. "My master would lose his own life rather than desert a faithful servant. Harm me if you dare, and see what happens!"

At a sign from Quintilian everybody in the room rose, making a rutching of feet and a squeal of moved benches. Only Tros heard Conops' whisper:

"Now they will trust you! It was I who led you into this trap. Leave me and sail away. The worst they'll do is kill me."

For answer Tros grinned at him, grinned and nodded, clapped him on the back.

CHAPTER LXXIX

AT SIMON'S HOUSE

What money is, I know not. But concerning its lending, I know this: that if I lend not with it courage, sympathy and vision I but burden a man already burdened with his own need.

Give, then, and forget. Or else lend heart and money—aye, money and a gale of good-will to blow it to good use.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

TROS watched Conops led away through the door by which Chloe had entered, and then beckoned to Horatius Verres.

"Roman," he said, "you have risked my life for Cæsar's sake. Now the wind shifts. Lean the other way and serve me or, by all the gods, you shall not live to mock my downfall!"

"I serve Cæsar!" Verres answered.

"I also, by the irony of fate!"

Tros took him by the shoulder.

"My father, Perseus, Prince of Samothrace, tortured to his death by Cæsar's executioners, told me with his dying breath that I should live to serve that robber of men's liberties, whose enemy I am! I see I must."

"Serve well!" said Verres. "Cæsar values good-will higher than the deed."

"I bear him ill-will, but I will not be his murderer," Tros answered. "In fair fight, yes. In treachery I have no willing hand."

"I believe you," said Verres, and nodded.

"Then tell me, when is Cæsar coming?"

"I don't know," Verres answered. "If I did know, I might lie to you. Since I don't know, I tell you the plain truth."

"You know that Pkauchios has prophesied the death of Cæsar. Do you know that he expects the news of Cæsar's death to-night?" Tros asked him.

Verres nodded.

"Do you know by what means he expects the news?"

"By a slave, I suppose. He sent murderers to Gaul. Doubtless he has reckoned up the days, hours, minutes and awaits a messenger."

Tros gripped him again by the shoulder.

"Get you a disguise," he said. "To-night, near midnight, creep into Balbus' garden and send word to Pkauchios by one of Balbus' slaves that a messenger has come from Gaul who wishes word with him. When Pkauchios comes to you, whisper to him from the darkness, 'Cæsar is dead!' Then Pkauchios will return into the house and make the signal to me to slay Balbus. But instead, when the trumpets sound, my men will rush into the house and protect him against Pkauchios' rabble."

"There will be more than rabble," Verres answered. "Pkauchios has bribed some of the Roman guard. I know that, for I know where some of them have spent the money and I have heard that they boast how they will excuse themselves by saying that Balbus plotted against Rome. I think you will have a hard time to save Balbus' life. Yet if you warn him, he will only suspect you and throw you in prison. Cæsar understands good-will. Balbus only understands a fact that he can see with his two eyes, feel with his two hands, bite with his teeth and then turn promptly into an advantage for himself. I think that even should you save his life, he will turn on you afterward."

"I will cross that bridge when the time comes," Tros replied. "Will you whisper that word to Pkauchios?"

"Yes. I can lie to him circumstantially. I know the names of the murderers he sent to Gaul."

Tros wasted no more time on him, knew he must trust him whether he wished to or not, dismissed him with a gesture, beckoned Chloe. She laughed in his face confidently yet not without wistfulness.

"Now we are all committed," she said, "and all depends on you! We die unless you win for us all to-night!"

It was her action that restored Tros's trust in her. She slipped a phial into his hand, a tiny thing not bigger than a joint of her own finger.

"Three drops from that are enough," she remarked. "It is swifter than crucifixion or being butchered at the games!"

"I go to Simon's house," Tros answered, pocketing the phial. He understood enough of the Samothracian teachings to despise the thought of suicide, but he did not propose to chill her friendliness by refusing such proof of it. "Go you to Pkauchios' eunuch. Lie to him as to where I am. Invent your own tale. Bid him look for me at Simon's house. Then go back to your master Pkauchios and tell a likely tale to him."

She nodded and vanished through the same door through which they had taken Conops.

"Simon, old friend, we squander time like men asleep!" said Tros. "Where waits your litter? Will it hold the two of us?"

Simon rose to his feet, but he was numb, dumb, stupid with the fear that made him tremble and contracted all the muscles of his throat until his breath came like the rasping of a saw-mill. He gestured helplessly, but no words passed his lips, though he tried as he leaned on Tros's shoulder. Quintilian approached to reassure them both:

"We nineteen and the few we keep in our employ are not ingrates," he said. "Balbus tortured one of our people all day yesterday. He betrayed no one. We will protect you in all ways possible."

Quintilian led Tros and Simon out by tunnels and devious passages to a walled yard where Simon's litter waited; there he told off four men to follow the litter secretly as far as Simon's house, where they approached by a back street so as not to be seen by Pkauchios' eunuch.

It was an almost typically eastern house—all squalor on the outside, with windowless walls and doors a foot thick, fit to be defended against anything less than Roman battering-rams. The plaster on the walls was peeling off; there was no paint, nothing except size to offset the appearance of mean shabbiness. But within was splendor.

The door in the wall of the back street opened on a tiled court, with a fountain and exotic trees in carved stone Grecian pots. A Jewish major domo marshaled half a dozen slaves, who set chairs and a table beneath potted palms. More slaves brought cooling drinks and light refreshment. Simon in the guise of host began to throw off some of the paralysis of fear; in his own house he was master and the evidence of wealth around him counteracted the terror of debt and the anguish of unsecured loans, made to powerful, slow-paying creditors.

"Write two bills on Balbus' treasury," said Tros, "one for two hundred and twenty thousand sesterces, the other for whatever balance Balbus owes you."

Simon wrote, his hand trembling and, signing, gave the bills to Tros.

"Tros, Tros," he said, "I rue the day I ever came to Gades! It was bad enough in Alexandria, where Ptolemy the Piper borrowed from the Romans and taxed us Alexandrians to death to pay the interest. But Ptolemy was human and knew men must live. We all lived well in Alexandria. *Yey!* These Balbuses and Cæsars think of nothing but themselves and their ambition!"

Tros clapped him on the back, his mind on pearls he had on board the ship. There was market for enough of them in Gades to relieve all Simon's difficulties. Yet the druids had not given them to him to provide relief for slave-trading Jews. It was bad enough to have to give a dozen of them to a dancing girl. Simon, his mind groping for new hope, detected something masked under Tros's air of reckless reassurance.

"Tros," he said, "haven't you a cargo on your ship, some tin or something with which we two could turn a profit? Better that than running risks with Balbus! *Stchnyarrh!* That Roman would kill us both, for having talked with the committee of nineteen, rather than pay those orders on his treasury! Any excuse would serve him! Spies may have seen us. Safer to go to him straight away, denounce Pkauchios and beg a trading-favor from him as reward! That's it! That's it! Beg leave to take a shipload of my slaves to Ostia! Then I can draw money against them here in Gades—"

Tros interrupted with another shoulder slap. That panic mood of Simon's had to be cured at all costs, druids or no druids. But he was cautious.

"Simon, I have assets in reserve. If I should fail to-night to coax your money out of Balbus for you, I will loan you enough to tide you over."

"Ah! But the Roman wolf is crafty! What if Balbus learns of this conspiracy too soon and sets a trap for you, accuses you of a plot to murder him and—"

Tros touched his sword-hilt.

"Simon, I have two hundred and fifty fighting men. It will be a sorry pass if I can't cut my way to the beach."

"And me? What of me?"

"I will take you with me. Since you are so fearful, hide yourself to-night on my ship—"

"No," said Simon, "no! Those beach guards would arrest me!"

"Very well, then hide by the city gate. Watch the street from an upper window. Keep two or three men near you whom you can trust. Then, if you see anything of Roman soldiers entering the city after dark, you can send me warning—your messenger can pretend he brings me news about the safety of my ship. Balbus' servants may admit him, but if not, they will at least announce a messenger and I will understand. If it comes to a fight, Simon, I will pick you up by the city gate and carry you away with me. But I hold a hostage on my ship—one Gaius Suetonius. Balbus will search all Gades until he finds Conops to exchange against Gaius Suetonius."

"O-o-o-hey! But my household goods!" groaned Simon. "My daughters and my daughters' children!"

He put his head between his hands and leaned his elbows on the table. Tros stared at him, scratching the back of his head, wondering what argument to use next. He did not dare to leave the man in that state of panic, nor did he dare to threaten him. Fear is no antidote for fear. Somehow he must make him hope and give him courage.

"Simon," he said suddenly, "it is not too late for me to turn back. I will go to that committee of nineteen, tell them I have thought better of the risk and reclaim Conops. They will return him to me if I promise to leave Gades straight away!"

Simon sat up and for a moment stared at him with frightened eyes.

"You mean—you mean—?"

"I will sail away. I will forgive you what you owe me. I will let Gades rot in its own conspiracies."

"Tros! Tros! You can't! You promised! You can't back out of it, now you have gone this far!" Simon clutched his wrist, and Tros gave him time to feel the full force of a new emotion, staring at him coldly, looking resolute in his determination to have no more to do with Gades and its dancing-girl conspiracies. "Tros! I am an old man, you a young one! We are friends, your father was my friend. You—Tros!"

Tros shook his hand off.

"Farewell, Simon!"

"Tros! You will leave me to be crucified?"

"You have frightened me with your fears and your forebodings," Tros answered. "No man can succeed with such a lack of confidence as yours to make the skin creep up his back."

Simon staggered to his feet and, almost tottering, took hold of Tros by either arm.

"You—are you your father's son? You turn back? You?" His hoarse breath came in snores. "You leave us all at Chloe's mercy? Tros, do you know what it means to be at the mercy of a dancing girl of Gades? She knows everything. She will betray us all to save her own skin. Tros, if you leave us in the lurch now, may God—"

Tros drew Chloe's phial out of the pocket in his cloak. He offered it to Simon.

"Three drops," he remarked.

"*Stchnrarrh!* You! To that, what would your father have said? Tros, I will sooner endure the torture!"

Tros poised the phial in his hand.

"Simon, is it yes or no? Do we burn our bridge and see this matter through to a conclusion, or—"

He offered the phial again on his open palm. Simon took it, held it in his clenched fist, set his teeth—then suddenly dashed the phial to the tiles and smashed it into fragments. A cat came and sniffed at the liquid.

"Then we are agreed? You will be brave? You will see this through?" Tros asked.

His eye was on the cat; he was beginning to feel nearly sure of Simon.

"Go!" said Simon hoarsely. "Yes. I see this through. God give you wisdom, skill, cunning, and make Balbus blind! May God protect us all."

"Amen!" said Tros.

He was watching the cat. It had lapped up nearly all the poison and seemed none the worse for it.

"Watch Chloe!" Simon urged. "She is as fickle—as fickle as quicksilver! She will betray you for the very sake of cleverness at the last second if she can see a way of doing it!"

Tros nodded. The cat had selected a sunny, warm place in a palm pot and was licking its fur contentedly.

"She will play on your emotions, she will win your confidence, she will put herself into your power, but remember, she loves nothing except slavery! Her wits are sharp. She loves to be outwitted! She is clever enough to govern Gades by whispering to Pkauchios and Balbus. And with her whole soul she craves to be governed by some one cleverer than herself! Watch her, Tros!"

Tros watched the cat, which was watching a bird, its tail twitching with the inborn instinct of a destroyer. He kicked the fragments of the phial.

"Better have those gathered, Simon! Now I go marshal my men for to-night. I have a golden bugle that the Britons gave me, and if anything goes wrong at Balbus' supper I will wind a blast on it to summon Orwic and my men. So be waiting by the city gate with your daughters and your daughters' children if you wish, in case that I have to fight my way out of Balbus' clutches."

"Have you only that Briton and those Eskualdenak?" asked Simon.

"Aye," Tros answered. "I must leave my Northmen on the ship, and to man the longboat and the barge."

"Take care! Take care!" urged Simon. "Chloe will turn that Briton and your Eskualdenak against you if she sees advantage in it!"

"She will have shot her bolt and earned her pay," Tros answered, "if she has persuaded Pkauchios that I went from his house straight to yours. I will see that the eunuch has no chance to carry tales. Those Balearic slingers on the beach shall guard him and the litter bearers until I need them again to carry me to Balbus' house. Now, swiftly, write me out an order for the manumission of a slave and leave a space blank for the slave's name and plenty of room at the bottom for Balbus' seal and signature."

CHAPTER LXXX

IN BALBUS' DINING HALL

The Jews have a proverb that says, "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish." And the Romans say, "Wine tells truth." But how often is not such truth shameful?

As for me, I will not perish. I can not imagine that beyond death there is less than this life. Nay, nay, death is an awakening. But to some it may resemble waking after too much wine in evil company.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

IN the litter belonging to Pkauchios, borne by eight slaves and preceded by a sulkily insolent eunuch, Tros presented himself at the guardhouse by the arched front gate of Balbus' palace one hour after sunset. An officer of the gate guard peered into the litter; the eunuch sneered to him in an audible falsetto whisper about the incredible grossness of barbarians who did not give self-respecting servants time to change their uniform; the legionary clanked a shield against his breastplate as a signal to proceed and Tros was carried up a winding, broad path, in the shadow of imported Italian cypresses, into the glare of lamplight at the marble-columned porch.

There was a veritable herd of well-trained slaves in waiting. Two laid a mat for Tros to tread on as he rolled out of the litter. Two more held his cloak, lest it should inconvenience him as he moved. Two others spread a roll of carpet across the porch into the house, covering the three-headed dog done in colored mosaic and its legend, "*Cave Canem.*" Two splendidly dressed slaves preceded him into the house between two lines of bowing menials and led him into a small room to the left of the hallway where no less than three slaves dusted off his sandals. A household official offered to take charge of his sword, but Tros refused, which caused some snickering among the slaves.

"Tell Balbus, your master, that to me this sword is as his toga to himself. As he receives no guest without his toga, so I enter no man's house without my symbol of independence!"

The official, shrugging his shoulders, smirking, went away to bear that message and Tros sat down on a bench to wait. The slaves seemed amused that he should give himself such airs, yet have no personal attendants of his own; they whispered jibes about him in a language they thought he did not understand; but their snickering among themselves did not prevent Tros from hearing fragments of another conversation.

Close to the bench on which he sat were curtains concealing a doorway into another small room. He heard Chloe's voice distinctly:

"Pkauchios! It is a long time since you have dared to whip me! Come to your senses! I am Chloe, not one of the slaves who knows nothing about you!"

Pkauchios' answer was indistinct, a mere murmur of anger forced through set teeth. Then Chloe again—

"Pkauchios!"

The Egyptian spoke louder with bitter emphasis:

"I have endured your impudence too long! One disobedience to-night or one mistake, and I will have all your peculium confiscated! * I know where you put it out of my reach! I will demand it of Simon, who can't pay! Simon is one of many who will feel the weight of my hand when to-morrow's sun dawns! So remember, it is your own fault you have had no sleep. Dance and sing so well that Balbus is beside himself, or take the consequences and be whipped, reduced to beggary and sold to-morrow morning!"

The curtains parted and Pkauchios came through, frowning, stately, black-robed, with the asp of Egypt on his brow. He checked an expression of surprise at sight of Tros, but Tros managed to convince him he had heard nothing, by avoiding the obvious mistake of trying to convince him. He merely appeared glad to see him, showed him ostentatious deference for the benefit of the watchful slaves, and in a low voice spoke of the main issue:

"My men came ashore with your man, though the barge was hardly big enough to hold them. They are warned to keep silence in the quarry and to expect a midnight signal. Are your Gades rioters ready?"

Pkauchios nodded.

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* A slave's master had the right to do this, but the force of public opinion was against it. The usual practice was to manumit the slave in exchange for a lion's share of the money, and thus retain a valuable "client" plus more than the price of a substitute.

"They gather. Balbus' guard has been well bribed and will not interfere when a crowd surrounds the wall. When your men lead, mine will follow. Near midnight a small town twenty miles away will be set on fire and the legionaries will be summoned to keep order and to help put out the flames."

"In what mood is Balbus?" Tros asked him.

"He glooms. He has tortured witnesses all day and to no purpose. He even tried to read an augury in the entrails of a woman who was gored by a bull in the street as he came homeward. I have assured him you bring fortune."

"Go to him again then. Tell him I must be allowed to wear my sword and cloak."

"He will never permit it," said Pkauchios, shaking his head.

"Then I go away now!" Tros answered and began to stride toward the door.

His cloak was quite as necessary as the sword because it concealed the golden bugle.

Pkauchios detained him, clutching his arm violently; nervousness robbed him that second of all his hierophantic calm.

"I will try. But ask not too much, or you spoil all."

However, Tros knew how to deal with Romans, also with Egyptian sorcerers:

"All or nothing! Cloak and sword, or he may sup without me, and you may manage your own murders!" he added in a deep-growled undertone. Then, "Warn him he must make concessions if he hopes for help from me."

The Egyptian's face looked livid with resentment, but he vanished through the curtains and presently returned with Balbus' head steward, a freed man, ruddy from high living and exuding tact as well as dignity. He bowed, offering a wreath of bay leaves.

"Illustrious guest of my noble master," he said, "you are asked to pardon the indiscretion of the officious fool who first received you. He shall be soundly whipped. The noble Balbus naturally makes allowances for the customs of his guests and feels outraged that indignity was offered you. That handsome cloak and sword will ornament the simple style we keep, as truly as your presence will confer an honor. Pray permit me."

He adjusted the chaplet of bay leaves and, again bowing, led the way across a fountained courtyard into Balbus' presence, in a room whose walls were painted with pictures of Roman legendry but done in the Egyptian style by an artist who was evidently trained in Greece. There were six other Romans in the room, two of them military tribunes in crimson tunics. All rose to their feet as Tros entered; all eyed him curiously, each in turn acknowledging his stately bow but not one of them taking the trouble to return Pkauchios' ravenly solemn greeting. Pkauchios stood back against the wall, and Balbus in a rather tired voice broke the awkward silence:

"Welcome! Be whatever gods you worship kind to us all!"

He presented Tros to all the other guests, explaining nothing, merely saying he was Tros of Samothrace whose ship lay in the harbor. They asked Tros whether he had had a pleasant voyage, and one or two of them marveled loudly at his good health.

"Most sailors come ashore so sick they can hardly walk," said a tribune, admiring Tros's bulk and stature.

"Aye," said another, "and they all get drunk in Gades, where the fever enters as the fumes of wine depart. When Balbus rebuilds the city he will have enough sailors' bones to mix all the mortar, if he pleases!"

Ushering six slaves in front of him, the steward brought in sharply flavored wine, and Tros noticed that Balbus hardly took time to spill the usual libation to the gods before he drank deep and let the slave refill his goblet. He had drunk three times and appeared to feel the effect of it, for his eye was brighter, when he gestured very condescendingly to Tros to walk beside him and led the way across the fountained court toward the dining hall.

"You shall sit at my right hand," he said, as if offering the greatest favor in his gift.

The room in which the supper had been prepared was too large for the house, too grandiose, a foretaste, possibly, of Balbus' plans for a new city. It was overloaded with extravagant decoration. Two rows of columns divided the room into three equal sections, in the middle one of which was the supper table with the couches set, ends toward it.

At the host's end of the table was a dais hung with curtains, furnished with two gilded couches almost like long thrones. The dais was approached by three steps, and behind it were three more steps leading to a platform beneath a gallery. They had entered by a side-door, facing the kitchen and scullery; the main door of the room opened on that platform under the gallery at the rear of the dais.

Facing the dais, twenty feet beyond the table's lower end, was a wooden stage for the entertainers, with a flight of steps leading to the tiled floor of the room and smaller, narrower stages on either side for the musicians, who greeted the guests with a noisy burst of string-music—a jarring twangle of very skilfully manipulated chords.

"I dread drafts," said Balbus, explaining the crimson and blue curtains that hung from the canopy above the dais. "These stone buildings are cold when the night wind comes in from the sea. It is an ill wind, that sea wind. It moans. It makes me shudder."

He tossed off a great gobletful of red wine that the steward handed him, then reclined on the couch and signed to Tros to take the other one. The remaining guests were ushered to the places on either side of the table by obsequious attendants, and Pkauchios strode gloomily to what was evidently his usual place at the table's lower end, with his back to the stage. A procession of slaves brought jars of wine, offering each guest his choice of half-a-dozen vintages, and the guests began drinking at once, ignoring Pkauchios, pledging Balbus and one another amid jokes and laughter.

Balbus acknowledged the toast with a nod, but was silent for a long time, now and then glancing at Tros while he toyed with the food, all sorts of food, fish, eggs, whale-meat, peacock, sow's udders, venison, birds of a dozen varieties. Tros ate sparingly and drank less, but Balbus ate hardly at all, though he drank continually. There was almost no conversation up there on the dais until entertainment commenced on the stage and most of the guests readjusted their positions so as to watch more comfortably a performer on a slack-wire, who went through diabolical contortions with a naked knife in either hand.

The contortions seemed to suggest unpleasant memories to Balbus. He drank deep and leaned toward Tros.

"Now," he said, "we can talk."

Tros glanced at the curtains behind the dais, and hinted to Balbus that he was ready to talk secrets. Balbus jerked the curtains apart, revealing the great carved cypress door at the rear of the platform behind them. The door was slightly ajar, but it was fifteen feet or more away from the dais, and there was nobody there except one of Pkauchios' slaves squatting beside a basket.

"What do you do there?" Balbus asked him.

"I wait to summon the midnight dancers."

"Wait outside!" commanded Balbus, and closed the curtains on their noisy rings and rod with an impatient jerk. The wire-walker had vanished from the stage. There were nine girls dancing bawdily to dreamy music in a greenish light amid incense smoke, and the guests were giving full attention to the stage.

"I understand you wish for influence in Rome," said Balbus. "Cæsar has denounced you as a pirate. There is a way open to you to become the friend of all Cæsar's enemies."

"Are you his enemy?" Tros asked, and Balbus pouted, frowning.

"No. But the great Pompeius is my patron. A man in my position falls between two stools if he tries to serve two masters. If Cæsar should trespass into Hispania, which is Pompeius' and not Cæsar's province, he would do so at his own risk. My information is that he will be here within a few days."

Tros pretended to think awhile and to drink cup for cup with Balbus, but at the foot of his couch near the corner of the curtains there was a very large Greek vase containing flowers, into which it was not particularly difficult to empty a wine-goblet unobserved.

"If Cæsar died," Tros said at last, "Pompeius would be practically owner of the world. He would reward you."

Balbus nodded and drank deep again.

"Nothing for nothing!" Tros said abruptly. "I have brought with me the documents of which we spoke."

He drew the parchments from the pocket in his cloak.

"Presently, not now," said Balbus, showing irritation. "We will discuss those later. Watch this."

"There is nothing to discuss," Tros answered. "You have said you will sign these. Thereafter—"

But Chloe was on the stage, dancing and singing, and now Balbus had eyes and ears for nothing except her.

"Wonderful!" he muttered. "Wonderful!"

It was her wistfulness that pleased. Beneath the laughter and the daring was a hint of tragedy. She was arrayed in white, a wreath of roses in her hair—a picture of youth, innocence, mirth, modesty. But with an art beyond all fathoming she made it evident that modesty and innocence did not protect her. Not a gesture of indecency, no hint of the vulgarity the other dancers had displayed, marred rhythm, voice or harmony of sound and motion. *Saltavit placuit.*

But she pleased by being at the mercy of the men who watched, not posing as a victim that had been débauched, which is a blown rose, but as a bud just opening, aware of life, outbreathing from herself the fragrance of its essence, yet not hoping to be spared the pain of being plucked and trampled underfoot.

The words of the song she sang were Latin, but the mood was Greek, the tune a mere street melody imported by the legionaries from the wine-shops in the slums of Rome, cynically mocking its own plaintiveness.

Lover, trust the night. Day's beams shall burn again.
Dreams, trust the dawn; night's shadow shall return.
Blossom blow! Wind shall bring the warm rain.
Fruit fall! Sleep! Again a summer sun shall burn.
Vineyard, thy plunder sparkles in the red wine!
Wind among the sedges, ripples on the shore,
Laugh to me of glory in the passing. Oh my lover,
Is it only love whose ashes live no more?

There were tears in Balbus' eyes. He had reached an almost maudlin stage of drunkenness. When Chloe's dance was done and the noisy guests pledged her in refilled goblets of Falernian, he leaned over toward Tros again and murmured:

"I will buy that girl, though she cost me a senator's ransom! That dog of an Egyptian sorcerer shall find himself surprised for once! He may be able to read the skies, but in Gades I am Governor!"

Tros laughed, his mind on opportunity.

"For luck's sake, noble Balbus, sign these first and pledge me to your service!"

He thrust the parchments forward.

"What were they, I forget," said Balbus, passing a hand before his tired eyes. "O yes, Simon and a manumitted slave. Yes, I will presently be drunk. Yes, I will sign them."

He called for his secretary, who came with pen and ink-pot, kneeling on the dais beside Balbus' couch. The secretary read the documents.

"Are they correct?" asked Balbus.

"Simon's account is correct, and he has charged no interest, although he grants six months' time, but—"

"He may be dead in six months or an outlaw!" Balbus commented. The secretary smiled.

"—but the name of the slave to be manumitted is not written. The master's is—"

Balbus pushed him away; he nearly fell over backward. Chloe was coming down the steps from the stage amid shouts of greeting from the guests. "Dance, Chloe! Dance down here among us!"

Balbus beckoned to her.

"Bring my seal!" he snapped at the secretary. "Get me this business over with!"

Chloe came up to the dais and Balbus seized her around the waist, dragging her down beside him on the couch. To Tros it seemed her wistfulness was due to weariness as much as anything, but Balbus was too far gone in drink to make discrimination of that sort.

"Chloe!" he murmured sentimentally. "Chloe! Divine Chloe! What shall I do for you? That old Egyptian holds you at a price that—"

He kissed her and she let him cling to her lips, hugging her. The secretary came and pinched her leg. She glanced at him.

"Noble Balbus," she said, "documents to sign! Oh, who would be a Governor of Gades! La-la!"

She broke away and knelt beside the secretary, exchanging one swift glance with Tros as she rubbed at her mouth with the back of her hand. Balbus had crushed her lips against her teeth.

"Swiftly now and be gone with you!" said Balbus, and the secretary put the seal on all three documents, thereafter holding them for Balbus to attach his signature. Having signed, Balbus snatched them and gave them to Tros. Chloe laughed excitedly, in a way that made Balbus stare.

"Your pen," said Tros and the secretary brought it to him.

Tros wrote the name of Chloe in the space provided and the secretary, leaning, watching him, laughed aloud, throwing up his hand in a salute to Chloe. Her eyes blazed answer, and it was that that made Balbus turn and stare at Tros.

"What is that? What have you written?" he demanded.

"I will read," Tros answered, and stood up.

There was dancing on the stage that had been set with branches to suggest a forest, through which satyrs pursued wood nymphs; but it was dull stuff after Chloe's entertainment. All eyes turned to Tros, and the musicians dimmed the clamor of their instruments.

"An order for the manumission of a slave," Tros read, his great voice booming through the hall. "In the name of the Senate and the Roman People, I, Lucius Cornelius Balbus Minor, Governor of Gades, in conformance with the law and with the powers vested in me, hereby manumit one Chloe, formerly a slave of Pkauchios the Egyptian, and do accord to her the status of freed woman with all rights and immunities thereunto pertaining, she having paid in full her value of two hundred thousand sesterces to Pkauchios and thereto in addition, into the public treasury, the manumisison tax of ten per cent."

Pkauchios sprang to his feet, indignant, staggered, his jaws working as he chewed on solid anger.

"But she hasn't paid it!" he exclaimed, his voice broken with excitement.

Tros gave a parchment to the secretary.

"Take it to him!"

The secretary, smiling with stored-up malice, descended to the floor and gave Pkauchios one of Simon's six months' bills on the treasury. He appeared to believe that Balbus had contrived the entire high-handed business, so proceeded at once to lend a hand in it.

"Noble Balbus!" he cried from the end of the table where Pkauchios stood staring at the parchment. "This order is for two hundred and twenty thousand sesterces, whereas the price was but two hundred thousand. The tax has been included in the payment made to Pkauchios."

The Egyptian lost his self-control. He shook the parchment in the faces of the grinning guests.

"This!" he exclaimed. "This is no payment! This is a mere promise—"

There was too much fume of wine in Balbus' head for him to let that speech pass. Tros had watched him hesitating angrily between repudiation of the documents on the score of trickery and the alternative of making a hard bargain in exchange. Now he turned the full force of his insulted dignity on Pkauchios:

"You speak of my promise as—what?" he demanded, rising from the couch. His legs were steady, but Tros stepped close to him and offered his arm, which he leaned on with relief. "Do you question my signature? Do you dare to insult me in the presence of my guests?"

"But this is an unheard-of thing," Pkauchios stammered, struggling to speak calmly.

"You question my authority?" demanded Balbus.

The Egyptian regained his self-control with a prodigious effort, drawing himself to his full height, breathing deeply, then folded the parchment and stuffed it into a pocket at his breast. His mouth was bitter, his eyes malignant.

"I was taken by surprise. I regret my improper exclamation. I accept the order," he remarked and sat down, rising again promptly because Balbus was still on his feet.

Tros's lips were close to Balbus' ear.

"You will never have to pay that bill," he whispered.

"He will sell it on the market," Balbus answered irritably.

Suddenly, under the pressure of personal interest, his brain cleared.

"Yes, yes, the tax!" he said, gesturing with his left hand to the secretary. "Hold that order on the treasury until Pkauchios pays the twenty thousand sesterces in coin. Otherwise the tax farmers will accuse me of irregularities."

He remained standing until Pkauchios had returned the parchment to the secretary, then sat down and drank from the silver wine cup that Chloe held for him.

"Divine Chloe, now you are a freed woman, but I have offended Pkauchios," he said, and kissed her. "No more will he read the omens for me."

Most of the guests were growing very drunk, and the girls who had been dancing on the stage came down to sprawl on the couches beside them. One of the two military tribunes noisily demanded that Pkauchios should deliver an augury. The Egyptian glared at him with concentrated scorn, but Balbus heard the repeated demand for an augury and approved it.

"Pkauchios!" he shouted. "Prove to us you are a true seer and no caviler at fortune!"

Pkauchios rose, glaring balefully at the drunken men and nearly naked women sprawling on the couches. It was nearly a minute before his eyes sought Balbus' face.

"I see fire!" he said then in a harsh voice. "I see a whole town burning and a thousand men fighting the flames!"

"Thank the gods, not Gades!" Balbus muttered. "If it were Gades it would be twenty thousand men!"

"I will read the stars!" said Pkauchios and with a bow of angry dignity began to stride toward the dais in order to leave the room by the big door behind Balbus.

It was Chloe who intercepted him. She broke away from Balbus' arms and ran to meet him midway of the room, putting both hands on his shoulders. Pkauchios stepped back from her.

"Ingrate!" he growled between set teeth. The coiled asp on his forehead was a perfect complement to the hatred in his eyes. Chloe began whispering to him rapidly, but Pkauchios' face was like a wall against her words.

There began a noise of shouting in the court. The door behind Balbus swung open and a centurion entered breathless. Balbus jerked back the curtains.

"Well? What?" he demanded.

"Fire!" said the centurion. "A town is burning about twenty miles away. We think it is Porta Valleculæ. The tribune Publius Columella has marched all available men to extinguish the flames. He requests you to make arrangements in behalf of those whose homes are burned."

"They shall have work in the quarries!" Balbus answered. "Bid him bring the destitute to Gades!"

The centurion saluted and withdrew. Balbus closed the curtains with a shudder at the draft, then stared at Pkauchios, who was still scowling at Chloe; but it was now Pkauchios who was whispering. His lips moved slowly, as if he were measuring threats between his teeth.

"A marvel of a man!" said Balbus. "Did you hear him just now say he could see fire? Fire and a thousand men?"

Chloe had moved so that she could catch Tros's eyes; it seemed to him that she was trying to signal to him almost imperceptibly. He touched Balbus' elbow.

"It is too early yet to read the stars. He should read them nearer midnight."

Balbus glanced at Tros impatiently.

"It was he," he said, "who prophesied your coming and Cæsar's death."

"Near midnight is the time," Tros answered. "I am a seaman. I know."

Suddenly Chloe screamed so shrilly that she startled all the amorously drunken guests and brought them sitting upright, staring at her. She clapped both hands to her eyes and ran toward the dais, stumbling up the steps and flinging herself on her knees by Tros's couch, sobbing.

"Stop him!" she whispered. "Stop him!"

Then, as if realizing she had come to the wrong couch, still sobbing with her hands before her eyes, she rose again and staggered into Balbus' arms.

"He cursed me!" she moaned. "He cursed me!"

Balbus began to try to comfort her, patting her between the shoulders, burying his own face in her hair, which gave her an opportunity to catch Tros's eye again. She made a grimace at him and jerked her head in the direction of the stage, then resumed her sobbing. Pkauchios strode solemnly toward the door. Balbus, distracted by Chloe's grief, took no notice of him.

"Music!" Tros suggested, nudging Balbus' elbow. "Who is in charge of the entertainers? It is music that—"

Balbus laid Chloe sobbing on the couch. She was crying, "He cursed me! Oh, he cursed me!"

"Pkauchios!" he thundered and the Egyptian turned to face him. "Never was such a miserable farce in my house as this night's entertainment! Where are the singers? Why has the music ceased? You promised me such song and dancing for to-night as should—"

"You bade me read the stars," Pkauchios retorted angrily.

"No insolence!" said Balbus. "To your duty! Read me the stars at midnight."

Pkauchios turned back toward the stage and gave his orders to a wizened man with painted cheeks, who disappeared behind the stage. The orchestra began a brilliant, eccentric tune; the kitchen slaves came hurrying with a dozen dishes heaped with steaming food, and the wine-bearers went the rounds. Laughter and conversation began again as a dozen girls writhed on to the stage to perform one of the dances that had made Gades infamous. Chloe ceased her sobbing. Balbus drank deep. Chloe begged leave from him to go and wash her face before she danced again. The slaves filled up the wine cups and Balbus, refusing food, leaned over toward Tros, his drunken brain leaping from one passionate emotion to another.

"We were speaking of Cæsar. I must have no official knowledge. Do what you will suddenly, at the first chance that presents itself. Then go to Rome and I will send letters overland recommending you to the favor of Pompeius, who will be absolute master of Rome as soon as Cæsar is out of the way."

"Do you wish me to kill him in your house?" Tros asked.

"Kill him anywhere, so be you do it!"

The women on the stage danced in a delirium of orgy, parodying nature, blaspheming art, ideals, decency. Red light and incense smoke distorted the infernal scene; low drum-beats throbbed through it. One of the military tribunes stood and began singing drunkenly a song that had been outlawed by the Roman ædiles. Balbus lay chin on hands, staring at the stage. Tros felt a hand on his back, heard a whisper. Chloe had crept back between the curtains.

"Simon sends word there are soldiers coming through the city gate!"

She slipped away and knelt beside Balbus, who threw an arm around her, but went on staring at the stage. Tros did not move. He was watching Pkauchios, who was listening to the whisperings of a slave. The Egyptian's face was a picture of emotions stirring beneath a mask worn very thin.

There began to be a creeping up Tros's spine. He felt the crisis had arrived too soon. Something, he could not guess what, was happening to upset calculations. He glanced at Balbus, who was almost sleeping; Chloe with subtly caressing fingers was stroking the back of his head and his temples. She smiled and nodded, her eyes shining with excitement. Plainly she knew what was happening. Tros drew out a little bag of pearls, poured them into the palm of his hand, showed them to her and put them away again. She nodded, but he knew her delight in intrigue had run away with her. She would let the pearls go for the thrill of a dramatic climax.

The girls on the stage writhed naked in infernal symbolism. The stringed instruments and muted drums tortured imagination. Pkauchios got up and left the room by a door close to the stage and Balbus, staring at the dancers, did not notice him. Tros felt for the bugle underneath his cloak, wondering whether Orwic and the Eskualdenak were ready. It was not yet nearly midnight. Possibly some spy had seen them in the quarry; perhaps the soldiers coming through the city gate were on their way to surround them in the dark. But if so, why had nobody warned Balbus?

The suspense became intolerable. He made up his mind to wind a signal on the golden bugle. Better to summon his men and run for it than to run the risk of having them made prisoners. But as he clutched at the bugle Pkauchios returned and stood with his back to the stage, both hands raised, eyes ablaze, his body trembling with excitement.

"Balbus!" he shouted. "Cæsar is dead! The news has come from Gaul!"

Balbus sat up suddenly and stared. The music stopped. Chloe slipped away from him and stood at the edge of the dais. The dancers ceased their writhing. Pkauchios signaled to Tros with a gesture like a dagger thrust, then threw up his right hand and shouted:

"Let the trumpets peal the verdict of the sky!"

Tros clutched his sword. He thought he heard the tramp of armed men, but it was drowned by a flourish of trumpets. There was a clang of shields on armor. He leaped to his feet as the door behind the curtain opened suddenly. A hand wrenched back the curtains of the dais and revealed Julius Cæsar with an armored Roman veteran on either side of him!

Cæsar was in white, unhelmeted, a wreath of laurel on his brow, his scarlet cloak thrown back over his shoulder and his lean face smiling like a god's, inscrutable, alert, amused, as calm as marble.

The centurion at his right hand raised a richly decorated shield and shouted:

"Caius Julius Cæsar, imperator, proconsul and commander of the Roman troops in Gaul!"

CHAPTER LXXXI

CÆSAR—IMPERATOR!

Aye, measure. Milestones; beacons—distance from a headland to a headland; time; the price of onions and sailcloth; speed; angle of heel of a ship in a gale of wind. A ship is built by measure.

But the measure by which one man is greater than another, show it to me! I have seen a pox slay thousands. Is a pox, then, greater than the wisely gentle whom it slew with its foulness?

Blow ye your boasts! I have a sail and the sun and stars to steer by toward open sea.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

The dancers vanished. The women sprawling on the couches fled. Balbus and his guests staggered to their feet.

"Cæsar!" said Balbus.

Cæsar smiled genially. If he had noticed Tros yet, he gave no sign of it.

"No, no, Balbus! Pray be seated. Pray don't disturb yourself."

His voice, a shade ironical, was reassuring. There was no hint in it of violence. But behind him were more armed men than Tros could count from where he stood. They were formed up in a solid phalanx in the hall.

"Don't let me interrupt your gaiety," said Cæsar. "I have already had my supper."

"There came news of your death!" Balbus stammered.

"I overheard it. Does it seem true to you?" asked Cæsar, smiling again.

His eyes began to scrutinize the guests, who saluted as he noticed them, but he ignored Tros at the corner of the dais. He appeared to Tros to be deliberately giving Balbus time to recover his wits. Tros, the golden bugle in his left, kept his right hand on his sword-hilt, listening, trying to discover how many armed men Cæsar had with him. None noticed Pkauchios, until suddenly Chloe screamed as the Egyptian sprang at the dais from behind Tros—mad, foaming at the mouth.

"Slay!" he screamed, striking at Tros with his left hand, trying to push him forward toward Balbus, then rushing at Cæsar.

Tros tripped him. He fell on his back on the dais, striking with a wave-edged dagger at the air.

"Dog of a Samothracian!" he yelled. Frenzied, he leaped to his feet with the energy of an old ape at bay and sprang at Tros, who knocked him down again. A legionary stepped out of the ranks at Cæsar's back and calmly drew a sword across his throat.

"Now I am no longer a freed woman. I am free!" said Chloe. "And Balbus, you need never pay that debt!"

Cæsar looked bored by the interruption. Slaves came and dragged away Pkauchios' body, Balbus' steward superintending, making himself very inconspicuous. A wine-bearer poured choice Falernian over the blood on the dais carpet, and another slave mopped it up with his own long loin-cloth, running naked from the room. The steward threw salt on the carpet and covered the spot with a service napkin of blue linen.

Chloe stepped straight up to Cæsar and knelt smiling up at him with all the charm she could contrive.

"Imperator," she said, "I am Chloe, who danced for you in Gaul—she whom Horatius Verres trusted."

Horatius Verres stepped out from behind the ranks of legionaries and stood between Tros and Cæsar, watching with a quiet smile on his handsome face. He was dressed as a slave in a drab-colored tunic of coarse cloth.

"Tut-tut!" said Cæsar. "Go and clothe yourself!"

Horatius Verres made a humorous, helpless gesture. Balbus' steward touched him from behind and beckoned. He shrugged his shoulders and went with the steward to be rearrayed in borrowed finery. Tros made up his mind there were not so many men at Cæsar's back; he raised the bugle to his lips and Cæsar noticed him at last.

"Your men are here already," he said. "They are behind me!"

As if in answer to his words there began a roar of fighting. A centurion barked an order. About half of Cæsar's own men faced about and vanished toward the front of the house, but Cæsar took no notice whatever of the disturbance.

"Balbus," he said, "a noble enemy is preferable to any faithless friend. The story goes you sent men into Gaul to murder me."

Chloe was still kneeling. She caught her breath and glanced sharply at Balbus' face. Balbus, deathly white, threw up his right hand.

"Cæsar, by the immortal gods I swear—"

Something choked Balbus. He coughed. He had become aware that Tros was staring at him. He drew three breaths before he found his voice again:

"—that sorcerer, now dead, that Egyptian Pkauchios—and—"

He turned and looked straight at Tros, began to raise his arm to point at him. Tros drew his sword.

"Balbus," said Cæsar, "you have been well served! Well for you that Tros of Samothrace put into Gades!"

Balbus gasped. Tros stood with drawn sword watching Cæsar's face. A centurion came pushing past the legionaries and whispered to Cæsar from behind him. Horatius Verres reëntered the room, handsome, smiling, splendid in a Roman tunic with a broad blue border, and stood close to Tros again, glancing at the drawn sword with a humorous expression.

Balbus' brain was wavering between surrender to the fumes of wine and a sort of half hysterical recovery. Tros's mind was on Orwic and his men, but he could not fight his way past Cæsar's legionaries. Cæsar fascinated him. The man's cool self-command, his manners, daring and superb contempt for any genius less comprehensive that his own stirred grudging admiration.

Chloe broke the silence—

"Imperator—"

But Cæsar checked her with a gesture of his left hand. He was listening. Tros, too, caught the sound of footsteps surging over the porch into the house.

"Orwic!" he shouted.

There came an answering yell, and half the legionaries behind Cæsar faced about.

"Orwic, hold your men!" Tros roared in Gaulish. Then, watching Cæsar's face, "Let none escape! Let a hundred of your men surround the house and guard all exits!"

He laughed. He heard Orwic's boyish voice repeating the order to the Eskualdenak.

"Cæsar," he said, "I have more than five men to your one! The camp is empty, the Roman legion went to a burning village—"

"Yes," said Cæsar, "but that was not your doing, Tros, so you must not boast of it."

"Cæsar!" said Balbus suddenly, recovering his wits, "this is not your province!"

He glanced at Tros, a fever of excitement in his eyes. The legionaries behind Cæsar moved alertly to protect him.

"The illustrious Tros and I are enemies," said Cæsar, "whose activities are not confined to provinces or marred by malice. We use common sense. I have not interfered with your government, Balbus. You must pardon me if I have interrupted even your—" he glanced at the stage—"amusement."

Tros's brain was speculating furiously. There were only two things Cæsar could be doing. Either he had surprises up his sleeve and was talking to gain time, or else he was deliberately trying to bring Balbus to his senses with a view of getting his gratitude and making use of him. In either event, time was all-important.

"Cæsar," he said, "why did you come to Gades? What do you want?"

"Yes, Cæsar, what do you want?" demanded Balbus.

Cæsar smiled.

"For one thing, courtesy!" he answered. "Balbus, I consider you a churlish host! You offer me no seat, no welcome. You oppose me guiltily, as if I caught you in the act of treachery. Whereas I came for your sake."

But Balbus was too drunk to take a hint.

"You came uninvited!" he said, sneering.

Cæsar smiled again and glanced at Tros.

"I think we both did! Tros, for what reason did you come to Gades?"

"To prevent you from invading Britain, Cæsar!"

"Imperator, that is the truth!" said Chloe, and she would have said more, but Cæsar silenced her with a frown.

"Are you a slave?" he asked.

"No, Cæsar, I am free!"

"Then go to Horatius Verres and keep still."

Chloe sprang gaily to Verres' side and threw her arms around him, kissed him, or else whispered in his ear. Tros suspected the latter. Orwic was having trouble with the Eskualdenak, who were anxious to begin looting Balbus' treasures. In the outer hall his voice kept rising sharply. There were hot answers in almost incomprehensible Gaulish, and every once in a while a Roman centurion added his staccato warning to the noise. Horatius Verres spoke at last.

"Imperator," he said quietly, "I had the honor to report to you that Tros refused to murder Balbus, and you saw that when Pkauchios rushed at you, it was Tros who prevented. Now Chloe tells me that while Tros and Balbus supped together they discussed—"

"Silence!" snapped Balbus angrily. "Cæsar, will you take the word of a dancing girl against me?"

Cæsar eyed him with amused contempt.

"If she should testify for you, should I accept her evidence then?" he asked. Then after a pause, "Let Horatius Verres speak."

"Tros even left a pledge with the committee of nineteen to guarantee that he would not kill Balbus."

Balbus snorted.

"A committee of nineteen? I never heard of them!"

"You shall know them well," said Cæsar. "Continue, Verres."

"And while Tros and Balbus supped together they discussed—"

"Stop!" commanded Balbus, almost choking. "Cæsar, this is not your province! You have no authority to—"

Cæsar raised his right hand with a gesture so magnificent that Balbus checked a word midway and stared at him open-mouthed. Chloe was whispering again in Verres' ear. Cæsar nodded to Verres.

"They discussed what Tros had previously said to me before the committee of nineteen—how that his father, dying, prophesied he should eventually render Cæsar a great service."

Balbus breathed heavily and felt for something to lean against.

His steward stepped up to the dais and, lifting his arm, placed it on his own shoulder.

"My noble master has so burdened himself with public duties that he faints," he said, beckoning to a slave to bring wine.

"I suggest he has had wine enough," said Cæsar. "You may continue, Verres."

Chloe was watching Tros out of the corner of her eye. Her breast fluttered with excitement. Verres spoke:

"While Balbus and Tros supped together, they discussed whether it were true that you invaded Britain for the sake of pearls."

"I invaded Britain," said Cæsar, smiling slightly with the corners of his eyes as he saw Tros glare at Chloe, "because the Britons intrigued with the Gauls against me, despite all warnings. But I confess the thought of pearls did interest me. I have in mind to make a breastplate of them for the statue of the Venus Genetrix in Rome, from whose immortal womb I trace descent," he added pompously. It was his first hint of vulgarity, his first betrayal of a streak of weakness. "What else, Horatius Verres?"

"Tros, who promised thirty pearls to Chloe to procure for him the interview with Balbus, discussed with Balbus at the supper table how he might offer three hundred pearls to yourself, Imperator, as an inducement to you to bury enmity!"

The lie slid off his handsome lips as smoothly as the passing moment. Balbus, his steward urging with a whisper, leaped at opportunity at last.

"I told him he should offer at least a thousand pearls," he blustered, avoiding Tros's eyes. "Cæsar, the words had hardly left my lips when you burst in on us!"

Horatius Verres, hand to his mouth, stepped back a pace.

"I told you I serve Cæsar!" he whispered to Tros.

"Have you the pearls?" asked Cæsar, and Tros saw light at last, knew he must make a sacrifice, but saw he held the situation in the hollow of his hand.

"I have them on my ship," he answered, standing forth and facing Cæsar.

But his eyes were busily numbering the men at Cæsar's back. Beyond the legionaries, in the gloom of the fountained courtyard, he could dimly make out Orwic and the Eskualdenak crowding the Romans.

"I have here five men to your one, Cæsar, and I care nothing for your friendship."

"Have I offered it?" asked Cæsar, adjusting his wreath with one fore-finger. "Let us have no brawling, Tros. The place smells like a tavern"— he sniffed disgustedly—"but"— he bowed with mock politeness—"perhaps our host Balbus will excuse us if we act like sober men!"

"Cæsar, I could have slain you when you entered. I could slay you now," Tros answered. "I would hold my own life cheap at the price of saving Gaul and Hispania, but the gods have laid no such task on me. Ten tyrants might replace you if I slew the one. I came here for my own sake. I will pay three hundred pearls for what I want. Agree with me or—"

He raised the golden bugle to his lips. Orwic began shouting to him:

"Tros! Tros! What is happening?"

"Await my bugle blast," Tros answered. "Cæsar, is it yes or no?"

The legionaries raised their shields an inch or two, but Cæsar spread both arms out to restrain them.

"Better to die a thousand times than to live in fear of death," he said, "but I see, Tros, that you know that. Since neither you nor I fear death, we may stand on common ground. What is it you require of me?"

"You named me pirate," Tros growled at him.

"I withdraw that gladly, though you sunk my ships. You have served Rome by saving Gades from the mob. I will write it," said Cæsar.

"You owe my friend Simon of Gades three million sesterces," said Tros.

"If that were only all!" said Cæsar, smiling with an air of mock humility. "Debts, Tros, seem as necessary to a statesman as is the appetite that makes us eat. Your friend Simon shall be paid."

"How? When?" Tros asked him.

A flash of humor blazed in Cæsar's eyes. He looked at Balbus long and keenly.

"Balbus—how? When?" he asked calmly.

Balbus bit his lip.

"Come now, Balbus. Tros saved your life, and it is easier for me to act against you than to threaten you. How shall Simon be paid? That legion that went to Porta Valleculæ is on its way back, Balbus, shouting, 'Cæsar is imperator!'—No, no, Tros, there is a truce between us. Stay! I merely wish that Balbus should choose his allegiance—of your free will, Balbus—of your free will! You are under no distraint. As you wisely remarked, I have no authority in Gades, even though the committee of nineteen has begged me, on my way between the harbor and your house, to add Hispania to my province and appoint my own officials. They amused me, but it might amuse me more to—"

"Cæsar, I beg you to permit me to assume the debt!" said Balbus.

"I am afraid it will keep you poor and out of mischief for a long time," Cæsar remarked. "If I consent to allow to escape my mind irregularities that I have heard of, would it be agreeable to you to confer in future with that committee of nineteen with respect to all local issues?"

Balbus nodded sulkily.

"And to remember, Balbus, that they have my individual protection? If the world were my province—then would you wish to rebuild Gades?"

"Cæsar, I yield," said Balbus. "When the day comes that you strike at Pompey, I am with you."

"Tut-tut!" remarked Cæsar. "Who spoke of striking at Pompey? But I see Tros grows impatient. He is thinking of that legion on its way back from Porta Valleculae. Tros, you are a greater man than I believed you. A mere pirate would have plundered Gades with the opportunity you have had. Had you been a rash fool, you would have tried to kill me. You might even have succeeded and the world would have been the worse for it. So the world owes you a reward, Tros."

"Reward my men!" Tros answered. The Eskualdenak were growing noisier every minute and Orwic's voice was hoarse from trying to restrain them.

"Balbus shall pay them handsomely," said Cæsar. "They have saved his life. The world is richer for our noble Balbus, although he personally will be poorer for a long time! Yes, Tros, I will accept your gift of pearls for the breastplate of the Venus Genetrix, be it understood—a very amiable goddess, my immortal ancestress."

He strode forward to a couch and sat with grace and dignity, letting the scarlet cloak fall carefully to hide his knees.

"You are in haste, I don't doubt. Yes, of course, that legion is returning. Yes, yes. Balbus, may your secretary bring me ink and parchment? I carry my own pen. Tros, I believe you have my seal. Will you return it to me? Balbus, will you kindly see that Tros's men are handsomely paid? They were my men until Tros ran off with them, hah-hah! Very clever of you, Tros, but beware next time we meet! There was three months' pay at that time owing to each man. So I suggest it would be very handsome of you, Balbus, to give each man three months' full pay of a Roman soldier. It might encourage them not to loot the house! Then, will some one go for Simon and for the committee of nineteen? Balbus, I would like to introduce them to you and to recommend them personally to your generous consideration. By the way, Tros, where are those pearls?"

"On the ship," Tros answered.

Chloe came and stood in front of him and smiled. She held her hand out. Tros counted thirty pearls into her palm, holding his sword under his armpit.

"Cæsar!" she said excitedly. "Imperator! Grant me permission to wear pearls!"

Glancing up from the parchment he was writing, Cæsar frowned. Horatius Verres put a word in:

"Imperator, no permission will be needed. She will be a Roman's wife!"

"Very well. Why interrupt?" said Cæsar, and went on writing. "Balbus," he jerked over his shoulder, "are Tros's men being paid?"

"My treasurer is paying them."

"Has Simon been sent for? Very well. Be good enough to sign this undertaking to pay to Simon three million sesterces in equal payments of three hundred thousand sesterces every three months. You understand, of course, this payment is not taxable. He must receive the whole of it. Tros—"

He stood up, holding out a parchment.

"This confers on you authority to go anywhere you please, including Ostia and Rome. It specifically withdraws the charge of piracy against you and names you the friend of the Roman People. You will find the committee of nineteen on the porch. They will return your one-eyed hostage to you. If you should remove his other eye, he might see his way into trouble less easily.

"However, that is for you to decide. You will meet your friend Simon on your way toward the city gate. Be good enough to take him with you to your ship and to give him those pearls, which he may bring to me and I will give him this liquidation of his debt in exchange for them. I understand you have a hostage on your ship, one Gaius Suetonius. Release him, please. Not that he has any virtue, but for the sake of his beautiful armor. Have you any other prisoners?"

"Herod, the Jew," Tros answered.

"That scoundrel?" Cæsar nodded. "Send him to me in charge of Gaius Suetonius! Be good enough to avoid collision with the little ship on which I came. It is anchored rather close to yours. You will go to Rome now?"

"Aye!" Tros answered, accepting the parchment.

"Hah! You will try to prevent me from invading Britain! You will find the Romans less reasonable than myself. When you have failed, come and make your peace with me. I will receive you! Thanks for the pearls for the—"

"For the wives of the Roman senators!" said Tros and, bowing, first to Cæsar, then to Balbus, marched out straight through the ranks of Cæsar's bodyguard. He was greeted by a roar from the Eskualdenak:

"Wine! Women! Wine!"

His answering roar, bull-bellowed, cowed them into silence.

"To the ship! Behind me, march! Or I will give the lot of you to Cæsar! Ho there, Conops! Run ahead of me and keep a bright lookout for Simon."

Then he strode under the gloomy cypresses to Balbus' front gate and Orwic fell in step beside him full of eagerness to know exactly what had happened.

"Happened?" he said. "I have promised druids' pearls to Cæsar's light o' loves, and I have served Cæsar, though I had the best of him. Rot me all death-bed prophecies. They dull men's wits!"

"What next?" asked Orwic.

"Oar and sail for Ostia, before Cæsar has time to set a trap for us in Rome!"

CHAPTER LXXXII

ROME: 54 B.C.

I have failed often at what I attempted, and at the time I have learned from failure nothing except not to flatter it by calling it the end. At its worst it is but a beginning of some new phase of destiny. But looking backward, as when remembering night at daybreak, I have learned what gives me courage to look forward. I perceive that failure more often than not is the fruit of a man's forgetfulness of his own importance in the Eternal Plan.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

SUMMER twilight deepened and the bats began to flit among the tombs and trees that lined the Via Appia. Dim distant lights irregularly spaced, suggested villas, standing well back from the road amid orchards and shade-trees, but the stench of trash-heaps and decaying ordure overwhelmed the scent of flowers, and there was a dirge of stinging insects irritating to seafaring men. The slaves who bore Tros's litter flapped themselves with olive twigs, muttering and grunting as they bent under their burden.

Beside the litter, cursing unaccustomed sandal-straps that chafed his swollen feet, limped Conops, with the tassel of his knitted seaman's cap dangling over the empty socket of his right eye. With his left hand he held the litter, and with the stick in his right hand he kept prodding the wretched contractor's slave in front of him, throwing him out of step and then abusing him in half the languages of Asia Minor.

On a horse behind the litter, looking like a centaur—for he rode magnificently—Orwic led twelve Britons, who marched leg-wearily with short spears over their shoulders; they wore a rather frightened look and crowded closely in the ranks. Behind them came a two-wheeled cart piled high with luggage held down by a net. Two Northmen were perched on top of the pile, and behind the cart trudged four-and-twenty other Northmen, battle-axes over shoulder, targets slung behind them. They swung from the loins like men well used to it, although there was a hint of a deep-sea roll, and more than a suggestion in the northern song they hummed of wind, waves and battle on a surf-enthundered beach.

A beacon many miles away behind—where one stage-contractor was giving warning to the next one beyond the skyline, that a personage was coming southward and would need relays of horses —gleamed on the narrow road and made imagination leap the shadows in between; the Via Appia ran as straight as an arrow and twenty weary miles resembled one.

In front, the lights of Rome blinked sparsely. There was a house on fire that threw a red glare on the belly of a cloud and showed in silhouette the roofs of temples and the outlines of two hills edged with buildings, like the teeth of a broken saw. There were temple lights, and over one or two streets where the night life swarmed there lay a stream of hazy yellow. Here and there a light showed through an upper window, and there was a suggestion rather than the sound of babeling tongues; Rome looked, in the near distance, like a crouching monster, and the ear deceived itself with what the eye conveyed.

In the shadows of the tombs and cypresses that lined the road lurked men—and occasionally women—who peered at the litter and vanished at the sight of so many armed men. Runaway slaves, almost numberless, lived in the shadow of terror cast by stenching gibbets, on which scourged human bodies writhed or rotted near every cross-road; there had been a recent and, as usual, sporadic outburst of official morals, so the runaways were rather less bold and more hungry, lurking in the neighborhood of villas and the north- and south-bound traffic, but afraid to try conclusions with the passer-by.

"Master," said Conops at last, thrusting his ugly head in through the litter curtains, "take advice from me for once and let us find an inn. There are enough of us to throw out all the thieves who occupy the place—"

"Aye, and to make a meal for nearly half the bedbugs!" Tros interrupted. "No more inns, little man! Rot me such dung-heaps!

Am I a Carthaginian ambassador [*] that Rome should not provide me with a decent place to sleep? I tell you, Conops, here, unless a man considers his own dignity, none thinks he has any."

"Would we were safely at sea again!" Conops grumbled, leaning his weight on the litter and kicking at one of the bearer-slaves, whose slouching irritated him.

"We are near Zeuxis' house. I see it yonder," Tros said, leaning through the curtains. "Bid the bearers turn where that tree, like a broken ship's mast, stands against the sky."

"Zeuxis sounds like a Greek in foreign parts," said Conops gloomily. "Commend me rather to a crocodile! Not for nothing, master, was I born in Hellas. Keepers of Roman inns are like their bedbugs—one can crack them between thumb and finger. But a Greek—has this Zeuxis a master?"

"He is a distinguished Roman citizen," Tros answered. "Furthermore, I have a hold on him."

"Poseidon pity us! A Greek turned Roman is a wolf with a woman's wits! Better give me the pearls to keep!"

"Keep your insolence in bounds, you ignorant salt-water fish! Go forward—lead the way up the path beyond that broken tree; try not to behave as if you were selling crabs out of a basket! Spruce yourself! Erect yourself! Up chin, you dismal looking dog! Put your knife out of sight! Shall Zeuxis' servants think we are Cilician pirates? Swagger forward now, and ruffle on the manners of a nobleman's retainer!"

Conops did his best, shaking the dust from his kilted skirt and straightening his cap, but he limped painfully. Orwic, recognizing climax, ordered out a great ship's lantern from the cart and sent one of the Britons running forward with it; he thrust the lantern into Conops' hand and ran back to his place in the ranks as if ghosts were after him, whereat Orwic laughed.

The lane by the broken tree was unpaved and dusty but there was a row of recently set cypresses on either hand; their height, a grown man's, intimated that the owner of the villa at the lane's end had not occupied it long, but he was advanced in his notions of living. There was gravel in the ruts, and there were no pigs sleeping in the shadows. The lowing of cows in the distance suggested affluence, and as the lane lengthened there began to be neat walls on either hand, built of the broken rubble of older walls well laid in *pozzolana*.*

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[*] One of the contributing causes of the Second Punic War was the indignation of the Carthaginian ambassadors at being obliged to stay at an inn outside Rome.

The lane ended at a high gate swung on masonry posts surmounted by marble statuary, whose outline merged itself into the gloom of overhanging trees. A grille in the wooden gate was opened in answer to Conops' demand to know what the owner of the house would say to keeping the most noble and famous Tros of Samothrace waiting in the dark. The slave behind the grille remarked that he would go and see. During the short pause, all of them, including Orwic's horse, flapped savagely at swarms of gnats.

Then the great gate swinging wide, revealed the porch of a Greco-Roman villa, newly built, its steps about two hundred paces from the garden entrance. Parchment-shaded lanterns cast a glow over the columned front, making the stucco look like weathered marble. There was a burst of music and an almost overwhelming scent of garden-flowers, as if the gate had dammed it and now let it pour into the lane. A dozen slaves came running, six on each side of the path, and behind them Zeuxis strode, combining haste with dignity, extending his arms in welcome as Tros rolled out of the litter and stood blinking at the lamplight.

"Tros of Samothrace—as welcome as Ortygian Artemis!" he cried in Greek, gesturing dramatically at the full moon rising like a mystery between the treetops.

"May the goddess bless your house, and you!" Tros answered. "Greeting, Zeuxis!"

They embraced and Tros presented Orwic, who rather embarrassed the Greek by leaping from his horse and also embracing him in the British fashion.

"All Rome would fight to kiss him if they knew how he can drive a chariot!" Tros said, half apologetically. "He is a barbarian prince."

"A prince among your followers—prosperity! The more the merrier, friend Tros, and the surprise adds zest. My house is yours; enter with your friend and take possession."

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* *Pulvis putteolanis*—the material which the Romans mixed with lime to make their famous concrete.

He led Tros by the arm, but paused to study him keenly in the lamplight on the porch, where slaves fawned and a steward prodded them to make them more obsequious.

"You have aged ten years in two," he remarked, "and yet—I will wager you bring good news."

Tros only grunted. Zeuxis led the way into a hall, of which he was comically ashamed. The walls were painted with scenes from the Iliad, done recently and too spectacularly. There the steward took charge of Tros and Orwic, leading them away to a bathroom, where slaves sluiced and kneaded them for half-an-hour and other slaves brought blue-bordered Roman clothing in place of their travel-stained Gaulish costumes. The luxury made Orwic talkative and it was an hour before they rejoined Zeuxis, in an anteroom beside the dining-room that faced on a tiled courtyard in which a fountain played amid flowers and young girls moved with calculated grace. There was music somewhere, not quite loud enough to make the fountain-splash inaudible.

"You must excuse my house," said Zeuxis. "I have baited it to catch some Roman buyer who has made a fortune selling war material. I am afraid the penalty you pay for coming unannounced is to wait for dinner, while the cook makes miracles. Why didn't you send word, you spirit of unexpectedness?"

Tros signified with a frown that he would prefer to keep silence until the slaves had left the room but Zeuxis laughed.

"My slaves will have your story from your followers. You may as well talk at your ease!" he assured him.

"I have only one man who can speak any language your servants know," Tros answered. "If your craftiest man—or woman—can get one word out of Conops, Rome is welcome to it. I sent no word because I trusted none to carry it."

The Greek leaned back in a gilded chair, looked humorously into Tros's eyes, took a goblet from a slave and held it while another poured the wine. Then he rose and, spilling a libation to the gods, smiled at Tros over the brim of the goblet.

"I see you understand the Romans," he remarked, and, having sipped, sat down again.

He was a handsome Greek with quantities of brownish hair curled artificially, his age perhaps not over forty, but not less than that. The care with which the wrinkles had been smoothed out from his face, and the deliberately studied youthfulness of gesture rather hinted that he might be older than he cared to seem. He had an air of artificial daintiness; there was a sapphire on the middle finger of his left hand that sparkled wickedly, calling attention to the delicacy of his fingers, which looked more capable of handling drawing instruments than weapons.

The contrast between him and Tros was as great as could be imagined between two men of the same race. Zeuxis' smile suggested cynicism and ability to reach a given goal by going around obstacles, which Tros would simply smash.

There was a desultory conversation for a while, because the slaves were Greek. Orwic, knowing neither Greek nor Latin, watched the scantily clad girls and after a while confined his interest to one, whose movements were deliberately calculated to enchant him. When the steward announced that the meal was served he followed Zeuxis with such manifest reluctance that the Greek laughed.

"Tell your barbarian friend not to leave his heart here. She shall wait on him at dinner."

The dining-room was classically elegant, its walls adorned with paintings of the Muses and divided into panels by Corinthian half-columns of white marble. The furniture was Alexandrian. The food, cooked by a slave from Syria, was carried in by Greek girls.

There was no sign of Zeuxis' wife; Tros guardedly remarked on it.

"She is at my country place in the Aventines," said Zeuxis. "Like many another foolish fellow I married youth and beauty instead of experience and domestic virtue. Beauty, in Rome, arouses greed; if possible one steals it; failing that one buys. If neither, then one gets the lawful owner into difficulties and converts him to a Roman point of view—which means, to look the other way. So I have sent my wife to the Aventines in charge of a virago who, current rumor has it, is a midwife; you will have noticed, however, that rumor frequently exaggerates. Meanwhile, my difficulties disappear and trade is excellent."

Lolling gracefully on his couch at the head of the table, with Tros on his right hand, Orwic on his left, toying with the food rather than enjoying it, he kept up a running comment for the steward's benefit, not often praising the skill with which the viands were made to resemble something they were not, more often explaining how they might be better.

"My Syrian cook is an artist," he complained to Tros. "In Alexandria they might appreciate him. Here in Rome you must be vulgar if you wish for popularity. Food must be solid, in gross quantities and decorated like the Forum with every imaginable kind of ornament, the more crowded and inappropriate the better. Rome proposes to debauch herself with culture; so I have to crucify a good cook's soul and train girls how to misbehave. I was cursed with vision when I came into the world; I foresee the trend of events, and I know I must swim with the stream or go under; so I try to guide the Romans decorously along the line of least resistance. They began by being wolves and they will end by being pigs, but that is for the gods to worry over, not me. I am a contractor. I arrange banquets. I decorate interiors for *equites* who grew rich lending money. You know the system, of course? The tax-farmers drain the treasury of conquered provinces, compelling them then to borrow at twenty-four per cent. compound interest; when accumulated interest amounts to half-a-dozen times the principal, the inhabitants are all sold into slavery. Most of my girls were obtained in that way. Damnable? Undoubtedly. But I might be a slave myself if I had stayed in Greece instead of coming here and flattering that rich rogue Crassus. He had me made a Roman citizen, although I might have had the same favor from Pompeius Magnus. Do you know how Crassus made his money? With a fire-brigade. There are some who say he also kept incendiaries. His men monopolized the putting out of fires by always arriving first on the scene in great numbers and fighting for the privilege. Soon nobody else dared to put a fire out. Crassus' men would simply stand by and let the place burn until the owner was willing to sell it to Crassus for a song. Then out would go the fire, Crassus would restore the place and let it out at rack-rents. He has the trick of money-making.

"But he is mad; he covets military honors. He has gone to fight the Parthians. He is envious of Cæsar's fame. Caius Julius Cæsar, if he lives, will ruin both him and Pompey, but they say Cæsar has the falling sickness. I have also heard said that his sickness is the result of slow poison secretly administered by one of his lieutenants in the pay of some patrician. Cæsar is a patrician; but he has made all the other patricians loathe him by his systematic pandering to the plebes. He sends gladiators for the games and corn-doles—that might not matter so much; they all do it. His worst offense is the money he sends from Gaul to buy the election of candidates who keep Rome in political torment. He also sends presents to senators' wives, and keeps a swarm of paid propagandists, who sing his praises to the crowd at every opportunity. Cæsar has brains. One of the brightest things he ever did was to marry his daughter to Pompey. She is a charming woman. Consequently, Pompey has to pose as Cæsar's friend, whatever his feelings may be—not that they are particularly secret—he says little, but every one knows he thinks Cæsar a dangerous demagogue."

Zeuxis gossiped gaily through the meal, doing his best to loosen Tros's tongue and reversing usual procedure, ordering the finer qualities of wine brought as the meal progressed. Orwic, unaccustomed to such subtle vintages, drank copiously and before the meal was over fell asleep. Tros's taciturnity only increased as he listened to Zeuxis' chatter. He had almost nothing to say until the meal was finished and Zeuxis wanted to leave Orwic in the woman's care.

"Zeus!" he exploded then. "Sober, a man needs help to save him from the women. Drunk, not all the gods together could protect him! And besides," he added, looking straight in Zeuxis' eyes, "I myself will tell you all you need to know. If you have a slave-woman who knows Gaulish, keep her for some necessary business."

Four slaves carried Orwic to a bedroom and Tros sent for Conops to sleep on a mat at the foot of the bed.

"Not that I doubt your honor, Zeuxis, I am thoughtful of it. This handsome cockerel recovers like a Phœnix from the ashes of a feast. Not remembering where he is, he might remember, nevertheless, that he is a king's nephew—which means a king's son, less the need of self-restraint. Conops knows how to manage him."

Conops' one eye glinted meaningly as he met Tros's glance and nodded. Hideous though he was, it took no augury to guess that Zeuxis' women had been making love to him for information; he made a gesture with a clenched fist that meant, and was interpreted to mean, "they have learned nothing from me!"

Zeuxis led into a room where gilded couches with a low wine-table set between them gave a view through an open window into the lamp-lighted courtyard, where a dozen girls were posing near a fountain.

"Shall they dance?" he asked.

"Aye—into the River Lethe! Let a slave set wine in here and leave us," Tros suggested.

Zeuxis laughed, dismissing the girls with a wave of his hand. The slaves retired. Tros strode to the curtain drawn on rings across the doorway and jerked it back to make sure none was listening. Then he glanced into the courtyard and at last sat down on the window-ledge, whence he could talk while watching both the courtyard and the corridor beyond the now uncurtained door.

"I am honored!" said Zeuxis, bantering him. "These must be deadly secrets you intend to pour forth. Come and drink; this wine of Chios was reserved for Ptolemy the Piper. I was able to acquire it because Ptolemy came to Rome to borrow money when the Alexandrians drove him off the throne. He gave a feast to a number of Roman senators, for which I was the contractor and, though they lent him money, he has never paid my bill. I shall have to repay myself by roundabout means. The senate is forever obedient to the money-lenders. Mark my words—they will send Cæsar or Marcus Antonius one of these days to collect. Drink! Ptolemy the Piper knows good wine, if nothing else. The old fool gave his note to Cæsar for seventeen and a half million sesterces to persuade him not to veto sending Gabinius and Rabirius to Egypt."

Tros reached under his tunic and produced a little bag tied tightly with a leather thong. He bit the thong loose, glanced into the bag, tied it again and tossed it into Zeuxis' lap. The Greek weighed it, eyed it curiously, opened it at last and poured nine pearls into his hand. His eyes blazed.

"Plunder?" he asked.

"My gift," said Tros.

"By Aphrodite's eyes! By all the jewelers of Ephesus—these are better than the pearls that Pompey took from Mithridates. There are no such pearls in Rome," said Zeuxis, rolling all nine on the palm of his hand and stirring them with a sensitive forefinger. "They are matched! Tros, they are priceless! Whom do you wish to have murdered?"

"Are you a contractor in that trade, too?" Tros asked him sourly.

"No, but since Sulla's time one can always hire that sort of tradesman. Nobody is safe in Rome without an armed band at his back. Do you wish me to introduce you to a Roman who will work himself, for a consideration, into the necessary righteous frenzy? And who is the victim to be? Some one important, or my wits deceive me as to the value of this present."

"When I must kill, then it is I who kill," Tros answered. "I could buy nine senators with those nine pearls."

"You force me to admire myself!" said Zeuxis. "Have you any more of these?"

"Nine more for you, of nearly the same weight if—when my venture is successful."

"Tros, you deal a dreadful blow against the inborn honesty of Hellas! * Whom do you wish me to betray to you, and why?"

"Yourself!" Tros answered. "One who did not know me might propose to play me false. But you will not commit that indiscretion. I have chosen you to assist me in a certain matter."

"You oblige me to pity myself!" remarked Zeuxis. "A king's nephew and a king's pearls? Rome is no playground for kings; they come here begging, or to walk in triumphs and be strangled afterward. Whoever befriends kings in Rome—and yet—friend Tros, these pearls are irresistible! Have you come like a messenger from Pluto to arrange my obsequies?"

"I come from Britain."

"Britain? The end-of-the-world-in-a-mist, where Cæsar landed with the famous Tenth and ran away again by night? Hah! How the patricians gloated over that defeat! I was decorating Cicero's new villa at Pompeii and I overheard him telling what the senate thought of it; they were overjoyed to learn that Cæsar is not invincible."

"But he is," said Tros. "He is invincible unless we can— Those pearls are in your hand because he *shall not be* invincible!"

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* Greece.

CHAPTER LXXXIII

POLITICS

A man forgets his own importance, but he magnifies want and the mystery of the many moods of want, his own included. He forgets that his wants and his fears and his perplexity are unimportant, but his own importance is eternal and changeless, whereas wants continually change, and fear is the illusion of which wants are brewed like foul stink from a wizard's kettle. If a man can remember his own importance he is saved from many unimportant but bemeaning deeds. His dignity, should he remember his importance and the unimportance of his fears and wants, directs him to a right course, though it may seem at the moment lacking in profundity of rightness.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Zeuxis stared, his shrewd imaginative eyes growing narrower under slightly lowered lids. He was not one who attempted to conceal emotions; he preferred exaggeration as a safer mask. But Tros's face, as he sat still on the window-ledge, was a picture of iron resolution, unafraid although aware of danger. Zeuxis was aware of an excitement he could not resist.

"I have a friend who is a king in Britain," Tros began, but Zeuxis interrupted—

"Kings are no man's friends."

"I helped him against Cæsar. He helped me to build my ship. Caswallon is his name."

"Did he give you these pearls? Beware! King's gifts are expensive."

"I had those from the druids."

"Ah! You interest me. I have talked with druids. Cæsar sent a dozen of them in a draft of prisoners from Gaul. One had a beard that nearly reached his knees. He was so old he had no teeth. It was hard to understand him, but he knew Greek and could write it. I befriended him. The others were sold as secretaries, but since that old one was a hierarch they were to keep him to walk in Cæsar's triumph; the weight of the fetters killed him before long —that and the stink of the dungeon; he was used to open air. There was a new ædile making a great bid for popularity. I was one of three contractors who had charge of the games he squandered stolen money on, so I had plenty of opportunity to talk with that old druid. I used to go down to the dungeons whenever I had time, pretending to look for some one who might make a showing against an enormous bear they had sent from Ephesus—bears usually kill a man with one blow, whereas what the spectators want is to see a fight. It was thought, if a man with a knife would defend himself against the bear for a few minutes that ædile might be very popular.

"I didn't find a man to fight the bear. I did not want to; I was interested in the druïd, he talked such charming nonsense with such an air of authority. He told me, among other things, that Cæsar is an agent of dark forces that will blot out what remains of the ancient Mysteries and make Rome all-powerful for a while. He said if Cæsar dies too soon those forces will find some one else, because their cycle has come, whatever that means, but meanwhile Cæsar is in the ascendant because he typifies the spirit that asserts itself in Rome. So if you think as much of the druids as I do, Tros, you will think twice before you oppose Cæsar."

"I have thought twice, and the second thought was like the first," Tros answered.

"Think a third time. Rome is violent, strong, cruel, split up into factions, yet united by its greed. They have had to postpone the elections. Pompey does nothing—I tell you, Cæsar is inevitable! Let us flatter Cæsar and grow rich when he has made himself master of the world!"

"Those pearls are worth a fortune," Tros reminded him.

"There is no such thing as enough," said Zeuxis. "There is too much and too little, but enough—who ever saw that? You have given me nine pearls. I covet nine more. I am Greek enough to know I must pay a usurer's price."

"No, you may give them back."

Tros held his hand out. Zeuxis poured the pearls into their little leather bag and slipped it into a pocket underneath his sleeve, where no one would have suspected a pocket might be hidden.

"What do you propose? A revolution?" he asked. "That would bring Cæsar down on us. He conquers Gaul for money and to make himself a reputation. He corrupts Rome into anarchy so as to have the city at his mercy when the time comes. I could guarantee to start a tumult the day after to-morrow, but as to the consequences—"

"If Cæsar should descend on Rome, he could not also invade Britain," Tros answered.

"But you might destroy Rome. Pompeius Magnus hates luxury and corruption—for other people. There is nothing too good for himself. He would rally the patricians to fight Cæsar's faction to the death. That might mean ruin for all of us. I am a parasite. I fatten on rich men's ignorance. There would be plenty of ignorance but no wealth after a civil war, whichever side should win."

"Let Rome rot. Who spoke of revolution?" Tros retorted. "I am here with thirty men to find some way of bridling Cæsar. I would not give one pearl to buy a Roman mob. They would sell themselves for two pearls to the next man, and for three pearls to a third. But I have bought you, Zeuxis! Tell me how to put a stick in Cæsar's wheel."

Zeuxis studied Tros's face over a goblet's rim.

"I prefer not to be crucified," he answered. "There is only one way to control Rome—through a woman."

Tros exploded. His snort was like a bison's when it spurns the turf.

"No truck with women! Let Cæsar manage the senate with his presents to the cuckolds' wives. I play a man's game."

"Fortuna ludum insolentem ludit!" *

Zeuxis filled his goblet, smiled and let the lamplight show the color of the wine.

"Ptolemy the Piper, king of Egypt, is a drunkard," he remarked. "I said nothing about women. I said 'through a woman'!"

"Lord Zeus!"

"But the very gods and goddesses love one another, Tros. However we may think of women in the mass, one woman brought you into the world and one bore me. One woman supplies the key to any situation. For instance, Cæsar's daughter has kept him and Pompey from each other's throats."

"I will not stoop to such practices," Tros answered.

"I have known men who were forced to rise to them!" said

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* "Fortune plays an *insolent* game."

Zeuxis. "I only mentioned Julia by way of illustration. She is too ill to be of any use to us. I was thinking of another woman—Helene, daughter of Theseus, a musician, who came with old King Ptolemy from Alexandria. She is the scandal and the admiration of all Rome. The sons of newly rich *equites* wear flowers filched from her garland and brawl about her in the streets, while their fathers defy even the Vestal Virgins in refusing to let her be expelled from Rome. Some say she is a spy for Ptolemy; others that she seeks revenge on Ptolemy and plots to send the Roman eagles into Egypt. The truth is, she has genius and seeks enjoyment. She adores sensation. It was she who posed to Timonides of Corinth for the new statue of the Venus Genetrix; his workshop was so thronged with visitors that he removed the unfinished statue all the way to Tarentum, but when he did that she refused to go there and the statue is still unfinished. She rides in a gilded litter, as she isn't a slave and they can't prevent it. Recently she offered to drive her own *quadriga* in the races. When the ædile refused to permit that she offered to fight Juma, the Nubian gladiator. Some think she might have beaten him, but the Vestal Virgins would not hear of such a scandalous proceeding. She understands that stirring of desire is much more profitable than to satisfy it. For a pearl or two we might persuade her to amuse herself immensely for our benefit. By Heracles, I have it!"

Zeuxis rose dramatically, one hand raised, as if he plucked a great idea from the ether, but Tros watched him without enthusiasm.

"Let us send the girl to Cæsar."

"Trash!" Tros answered. "I could dig that thought from any dunghill. Cæsar is not Paris, son of Priam—he is Cæsar. He would take, but the woman is not born who can seduce him. Cæsar smiles once, and the craftiest surrender to him like ice to the sun. I know him. Five times I have met him, and he—almost—won—me! I admired his brilliance. He has intellect. He recognizes strength on the instant, or weakness equally. He can read men's character as I read wind and sea; and he can use the rogue or the weakling as I use puffs of wind to fill my sails. But he prefers to match his strength against the strongest, even as I love conquering the storms. Five times I have met him. Three times I have beaten him. Each time he has offered me command of all his fleet. I laughed."

"I remember your father also was mad," remarked Zeuxis. "Why in the name of all the mysteries of death should you reject the friendship of a man like Cæsar? That is wanton waste of golden opportunity! And you a Greek from Samothrace! Have you not sense enough to realize that fortune favors Cæsar? Will you flaunt your prejudices in the face of Providence? I tell you, Cæsar will inevitably be master of the world unless an accident prevents."

"Then let my name be Accident," said Tros.

"In the name of the immortal gods who turned their backs on Hellas when the Romans came, let us be wise men and swim with the tide!" Zeuxis urged. "You and I are not heroes. Cæsar is. We might destroy him, as I have seen dogs drag down men in the arena; but the dogs did not turn into men; nor should we become Cæsars. Tros, I tell you, we should let this Cæsar burst a breach for us in fortune's walls and follow in with him. Success is sweet! I drink to it! Failure is bitter; lo, I hurl my dregs at it! Men live longest who know enough to follow fortune's favorites."

Tros snorted, thumping a fist down on his thigh. He glared at Zeuxis as if eyes could burn him up.

"Aye, gods have turned their backs on Hellas. She is dead. I live!" he answered. "I measure life by strength of living, not by days and nights and lustrums. Failure? A beached fish for it! Riches? There isn't a rogue in Rome who mayn't be as rich as Crassus if he has the luck. What is worth having in this life? Dignity and friendship, Zeuxis! Courage to stand by a friend! Vision and will! The choosing between right and wrong! The pluck to take the weaker side—the obstinacy to persist—rebellion against the wrong thing—action! Those are life."

"Then why not be the friend of Cæsar?" Zeuxis argued. "Friendship should not be squandered on unworthy people. If choosing is the gist of life, choose wisely! Cæsar will give you action; and if the apparently weaker side amuses you, choose his. He is all-powerful in Gaul, no doubt; but here in Italy Pompeius Magnus has the gage of him at present—or so the senate thinks, and so think nearly all the *equites* and the patricians—and so thinks Crassus, or he never would have gone to Asia to try to wrest a triumph from the Parthians. Select the cause that seems the weaker at the moment; then—success?—suppose we call it opportunity for further effort. You are a young man. You may outlive Cæsar. It would be no mean memory that you were Cæsar's friend. If he should have rewarded you—"

"With what?" Tros interrupted. "Money? The stolen gold of Gaul! Employment? Holding in subjection ravished provinces, or possibly offstanding pirates who are no worse than himself and only seek to glean where Cæsar harvested! Honors? He has no honor. He has avarice, energy, skill; he can arouse the sentiment of pauper-soldiers driven from their farms by cheap slave-labor enslaved by himself from looted provinces. But honor? He serves out honors as he feeds his legions, from the commissariat. He keeps faith when it pays him, and because it pays."

"By the forsaken gods of Hellas, Tros, I think we all do that," said Zeuxis. "You have paid me to keep faith with you; and since you whetted my discretion with one gesture of royal extravagance, why not confide in me a little? You spoke of a ship. Where is the ship? Where did you land in Italy?"

"I landed at Tarentum. My ship is at sea," Tros answered. "She will come for me to Ostia, where Conops shall quarter himself in order to hurry to me with the news of her arrival. I found me a pilot in Gades who knows Roman waters; and I have a Northman in charge of the ship, whom I trust because he and I fought until we learned the temper of each other's steel."

"Cæsar has a way of knowing what his enemies are doing. Does he know you are in Rome?" asked Zeuxis.

"He knew I left Gades for Rome. I had a brush with him in Gades. I won from him authority to use all Roman ports. I have a letter from him, signed and sealed."

"He knows you are his enemy?"

"He does."

"Then that letter is worth exactly the price of damaged parchment! I suppose you haven't heard how Cato proposed to the senate to revive Rome's reputation by sending Cæsar in fetters to the Usipetes and Tencteri. Cæsar broke his word to them and violated the law of nations; but how much support do you suppose Cato aroused? Men simply laughed. There is only one way to win influence in Rome—that is, purchase it in one way or another. If you buy with money in advance, the danger is that your opponent will out-buy you. Besides, how can you compete with Cæsar? His agents Balbus and Oppius have spent sixty million sesterces in buying up old buildings alone, to enlarge the Forum. Prices—any price at all; but 'Vote for Cæsar!' If any senator wants money he goes through the farce of selling a house or some worthless work of art to Cæsar at an enormous price, so as to avoid conviction of receiving bribes. The plunder from Gaul provides work at unheard-of-wages for the artizans, who would undoubtedly accept your bribes but would also continue to pocket Cæsar's wages; they look to Cæsar to go on enriching them forever, whereas you would only be a momentary opportunity.

"The better method is to entertain them, which is almost equally expensive. You would find the competition deadly. But there is this to be said; the mob will be faithful as long as nine days to whoever gives it a good thrill. After that you must think of another new thrill—and another one. Keep Rome entertained and you may even nominate her consuls."

Tros rose from his seat on the window-ledge and paced the room, his hands behind him and the muscles of his forearms standing out like knotted cords.

"You know Cato?" he demanded.

"Surely. Only recently he had me driven from his door. I represent the decadence he makes his reputation by denouncing—the ungrateful, vain, old-fashioned snarler! He is the best man in Rome and politically the most contemptible, because he means exactly what he says and keeps his promises. Pin no hopes on Cato."

"Cicero?"

"He owes me money for his new house. I have a little influence with him. But he is much more heavily in debt to Cæsar. Cicero measures gratitude by bulk; he will even praise bad poetry if rich men write it."

"Marcus Antonius?"

"Profligate—drunk—insatiable—rash—a Heracles with a golden voice, in love with popularity. He knows how to win the mob's plaudits—and at present he favors Cæsar."

"Have you the ear of Pompey?"

"Nobody has. He has the best taste of any man in Rome, so he is naturally disgusted with politics. He glooms in his country villa, where even senators are turned away. Pompey half imagines himself super-human but half doubts whether his good luck will continue. I believe he is losing his grip on himself. He recently refused to be made dictator on the ground that there is no need for one, but I think the fact is, he has no policy and doesn't know what to do. His wife is ill, and if she should die he might come out into the open as Cæsar's enemy, but at present he makes a show of friendship for him.

"His intimates flatter him out of his senses; and because of his easy success in the war against the pirates and his aristocratic air of keeping his intentions to himself he is the most feared man in Rome. But the mob believes Cæsar will bring fabulously rich loot out of Britain, which makes the moment inauspicious to oppose Cæsar; and though Pompey loathes the rabble he likes their votes. Who wouldn't? Also, I think he honestly dreads a civil war, which would be inevitable if he should announce himself as Cæsar's enemy. You have no chance with Pompey."

Tros came and stood in front of Zeuxis, frowning down at him, ignoring a proffered goblet of wine.

"Have you the ear of any one in Rome who would serve my purpose?" he demanded.

"I have told you—Helene of Alexandria."

Tros snorted again, but Zeuxis went on:

"At the moment she is keeping rather quiet because three days ago two factions of young fools fought about her with their daggers in the Forum. Two sons of *equites* were killed and half-a-dozen badly hurt. Cato was furious. She must be nearly bursting after three days' seclusion. She likes me because—well, to be candid with you—she influences business and draws fat commissions. The best advice I can give you is to see Helene."

Tros scowled and stroked his chin.

"To-morrow morning. Why not? It will be a novelty that will stir her craving for amusement. You arrive at the door of her villa with a handsome young barbarian prince, exactly at the moment when she is ready to burn the house over her head with boredom. Flatter her—amuse her—praise her—bribe her—and she will ruin Cæsar for you if it is possible to do it."

Tros groaned aloud, shaking his fists at the painted ceiling—

"O Almighty Zeus, am I never to be disentangled from the schemes of women?"

"You are forgetting Leda and the swan," said Zeuxis. "Even Father Zeus himself has had entanglements at times!"

CHAPTER LXXXIV

HELENE

I have seen many a man ape humility by magnifying the importance of his office and denying his own claim to be more than a servant. But his office is what he makes it, as a ship is what her builder makes her and behaves as her master directs. If a ship's crew is unseamanly, I know her master's character, no matter what his chastity of homage to the ill luck that he bids me witness. If I see a city foul with lewdness, I know its rulers' character, no matter what their mouthings about the sanctity of office and the grandeur of their institutions.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

THREE hours before dawn Tros awoke Orwic to discuss proposals with him.

"Cato is the noblest Roman of them all. He is incorruptible. This woman Helene is Rome's paramour. Cato's party is in contempt because it is old-fashioned and honest. Which shall it be? Shall we attack Rome's weakness or ally ourselves to strength?"

"Try both!" Orwic murmured sleepily. "What difference does it make to me? I know no Latin. I can neither make love to a woman nor address the senate! It appears I can't drink! That fellow Zeuxis' wine has made my head feel like a copper kettle."

Orwic fell asleep again. Tros went to his own room, where he lay cudgeling his brains. He could foresee nothing. It was possible he was in danger of his life, equally possible that Cæsar's enemies might leap at every opportunity and stage a demonstration that should force Cæsar to abandon his attempt on Britain. Should he adopt a subtle course or the direct one of appealing bluntly to such men as Cato, Cicero and Pompey?

Zeuxis, on the other hand, with pearls in mind, sent a slave with a letter in haste to Helene's villa. Three hours after daybreak two of her litters, borne by slaves in her livery and with a eunuch in attendance, waited in front of Zeuxis' porch.

By that time Zeuxis and his guests had breakfasted under the awning in the fountained courtyard. Already Zeuxis was deep in his affairs—mercurial, excited—giving orders to his foreman in an office whose walls were hidden behind drawings and sheaves of estimates. There was a staff of nine slaves busy figuring at long desks. A stream of tradesmen and subcontractors poured in and out, all chattering. But Zeuxis abandoned business when he heard that those litters had come.

"Tros, fortune smiles on us!"

He ordered his own chariot brought—an extremely plain affair, unpainted, drawn by mules.

"Lest I arouse cupidity! My customers would be annoyed if I looked rich. Rome is still a strait-laced city—except for the rich Romans!"

Refusing to explain, he almost dragged Tros into the first litter and waved Orwic into the other. Tros found himself on scented cushions behind embroidered silk* curtains through which he could see but remain unseen. An escort of men armed with staves went before and behind and a eunuch, modestly arrayed, but strutting like a peacock, led the way—for a while in the dust of Zeuxis' chariot. Zeuxis drove full pelt to have a first word with the lady who had sent the litters, and was shortly out of sight.

They passed into the city through a swarming crowd of slaves and merchants, skirted the Mons Palatinus by a smelly street between brick houses, crossed the Tiber by a wooden bridge, where slaves of the *municipium* stood guard at either end to put out fires and regulate the traffic, and emerged into a zone of trans-Tiberian villas, where hardly a house was visible because of densely planted trees and high walls, and the only gaudy ostentation was displayed on decorated gate-posts. There was much less traffic over-river, although chariots, often preceded by men on horseback and usually followed by breathless slaves on foot, were driven recklessly, their drivers shouting to foot-passengers to clear the way; and there were countless slaves carrying provisions and merchandise for sale.

*** There was quite a large trade in silk from China by way of Socotra and Alexandria.**

There were no armed men in evidence, but the high walls of the villas suggested fortifications and the general impression was of jealously guarded privacy.

The villa occupied, but not owned, by Helene faced the Tiber between higher walls than ordinary, above which the trees had been topped to make them spread into impenetrable masks of dusty green. On the high gate-posts were portraits in color intended to convey a sort of family likeness of the succession of Romans who had owned the place—and lost it to a money-lender, from whom Helene had rented it.

Her slaves were at the gate, all liveried. An impudent Cyprian eunuch, in canary-colored robes and wearing his mistress' portrait on a copper disk hung from his neck, commanded that the gate be opened, saluting the litters as they passed in, but tempering civility with a leer that made Tros's blood boil; and almost before the gate had slammed again his squeaky voice was raised in vinegary comment on the impatience of the slaves of certain *equites* who sought admission with letters and gifts to be delivered into the fair Alexandrian's hand.

"Tell your masters that my mistress will receive gifts when it pleases her. Has none brought any gifts for me? What sort of persons are your masters? Paupers? Plebes? Ignoramuses? What are they?"

The villa was built in the style that had grown fashionable when the Roman legions had brought their plunder home from Greece. It was faced with columns looted from a temple in Bœotia. Stolen statues—fawns, Bacchantes, Naiads—grinned, danced and piped under every group of trees, so that the grounds looked like the entrance to an art museum; it would have taxed even the ingenuity of a Roman money-lender to find room for one more proof that culture can be dragged in with a team of oxen.

But within there was something like taste, although the cornices were far too richly ornamented and the paintings on the walls were garish. Some woman's hand had draped the place with Babylonian embroidery, so rich that it challenged attention and threw overcrowded elegance into comparative obscurity. The art of Alexandria had overlaid confusion of design.

However, there was no time to admire the hangings. There was laughter, the echoing clash of weapons and the thumps of bare feet leaping on a marble floor. There was a glimpse along a marble corridor of gardens leading to the Tiber. The eunuch drew aside embroidered curtains to reveal a sunlit court surrounded by a balcony. Young Romans lounged against the columns, laughing and applauding; in the midst of one side Zeuxis sat amid a group of women, to whom he appeared to be giving intricate instructions. In the midst of the mosaic, sunlit floor, half-naked and aglow with exercise, Helene fought with net and trident against a Nubian armed with a blunted sword. There were great red splotches on her skin where he had smitten her, but he was backing away warily, circling toward her right to keep clear of the sharpened trident that she held in her left hand.

Suddenly, as Tros strode in, she lunged with the trident. The Nubian dodged and tried to smite her with the flat of his short weapon. She ducked, leaped, cast her net and caught him, spinning her trident and driving its blunt end with a thump against his ribs. Then, clinging to her rope, she spun herself around him, keeping him tight in the toils and prodding him until he yelled for mercy while the onlookers shouted applause.

"*Hic habet!* Punish him! Don't spare him!"

She did not cease until the Nubian went down on his back and she had put her foot on him, holding up her trident in imitation of a victor at the games, amid cries of "Kill him!"—"No, wait—whose gladiator is he? He might cost too much."—"I'll pay for him. Go on, Helene—see if you can kill him with the trident—only one thrust, mind!—it isn't so simple as it looks."

She laughed down at the gladiator, breathless, prodded him again and turned away—caught sight of Tros and Orwic with their backs to the curtained entrance, and came running to them.

"Which is the king's nephew? Which is Tros?" She looked at Orwic longest as he took her in his arms and kissed her; which was perfect British manners but, to put it mildly, unconventional in Rome. The sons of Roman *equites* roared their astonishment, loosing noisy volleys of jests, but Orwic kept her in his arms and kissed her three times before she could break free.

"*This* is the king's nephew!" she assured them in a strident laughing voice that made the courtyard ring. "The other—"

Tros raised up his hand in greeting and the banter ceased. He was dressed as a Roman; except for the gold band on his forehead and the length of his raven hair he might have been a Roman of the old school, conscious of the debt he owed his ancestors.

"—this other doubtless is the uncle!" said Helene. "I expected Tros of Samothrace. All hail, thou king of an end of the earth! Helene welcomes you to Rome, where even Ptolemy had to wait on Cato's doorstep! Isis! You have dignity! What muscle! Do you seek a queen, most terrifying majesty? Or is the nephew to be married? I abase myself!"

She curtsied to the marble floor, the rhythm of her movements bringing a burst of applause from the gilded youths, who cried to her to repeat it, some urging her to dance—all anxious to attract her attention to themselves. Zeuxis left the women who surrounded him and, stepping forward into the sunlight, cried out:

"Pardon, mistress! Noblemen, your pardon! This is the most noble Tros of Samothrace. His friend is a royal prince whose name is Orwic."

"Not a king?" Helene gasped in mock astonishment. "Lord Tros, that Greek fool told me *you* were no more than a sailor! Kings go to Rome's back-doors, but I see you are neither a fool of a king nor a louse with a vote for sale!"

Again she curtsied, three times, throwing back the dark hair from her forehead with a toss that suggested blossoms nodding in the wind. Then—

"Equites!" she cried, addressing the youths who had begun to swarm around her. "Favor me by entertaining them until I have bathed and dressed."

She ran off through a door between two Doric columns, followed by the women who had been surrounding Zeuxis. Zeuxis came forward again and introduced the Romans, reeling off their names as each one bowed with almost perfect insolence, restrained, however, within bounds by recognition of Tros's strength of character and muscle and air of being somebody who might have influence. They tried to talk to Orwic, but, as he could not understand them and disguised embarrassment behind an air of aristocratic boredom, they were obliged by curiosity to turn to Tros again.

"I am from Hispania," he answered, telling half the truth. "I have brought despatches from your imperator Cæsar," he added, which was more than half an untruth. "To the senate? No. What would Cæsar say to the senate?"

They all laughed at that. Whatever their opinions of Cæsar, none pretended that he held the senate in respect. They began to ask news of Cæsar, eagerly inquiring what the prospect was of his invading Britain and how true it might be that the Britons made their common cooking-pots of gold. So Tros seized opportunity and told them about Britain, saying it was nothing but a miserable, foggy island full of trees, where no wealth was and the inhabitants fought valiantly because there was nothing to make peace endurable.

"Then why does Cæsar talk of invasion?" they protested.

"Possibly he talks of one thing and intends another," Tros retorted. "It is known that he prepares an army, and I have heard something about ships. However, which way will to-morrow's wind blow? How many miles from Gaul to Rome? If I were a young Roman I would watch to see Pompey's eagles gather. These are wild times. Stranger things might happen than that Cæsar should propose to himself to seize Rome."

But such talk only vaguely interested them. They had the absolute contempt for politics peculiar to rich men's sons. The youngest of them had seen the mob made use of to reduce itself into submission. They had all heard gossip about Cæsar. They considered Pompey vastly his superior. However, Cæsar had significance.

"Cæsar has sent three more shiploads of wild animals from Gaul," said one of them. "There are to be games to celebrate his recent victories. They are to surpass anything ever seen in the Circus Maximus. Crassus' agents have sent bears from Asia. There will be nine elephants. From Africa Jugurtha has sent fifty coal-black savages from the interior, who look fit to fight even our best gladiators. And there are two hundred and ten criminals in the dungeons, some of them women; they talk of slaughtering the lot in one mêlée—give them a taste of the hot iron, and a spear or something to defend themselves, and turn the wild beasts loose on them! There is rumor of a promise of freedom for the last man and the last woman left alive—but that may be only talk to make them try hard."

An older man, Servilius Ahenobarbus, waxed scornful:

"Any one in his senses would rather see two good gladiators fight than watch a thousand people butchered," he objected. "Fie on you, Publius! Are you degenerating? Such stuff is all very well for the rabble. I can smell them in my nostrils as I think of it! Can't you hear the snarl and then the yelp as they watch women being ripped by a bull? Cæsar has sent bulls from Hispania. But you forget the best part—two days' chariot racing."

"Phaugh! A safe and pretty spectacle for Vestal Virgins!" Publius sneered. "I have heard Britons fix swords to their chariot wheels. Now, if they would have a race—*quadrigas,* say—with swords fixed to the wheels, wolves loosed at the horses and fifty or sixty prisoners of war in the way, tied in groups, to escape if they could, I would call that a spectacle! Wait until I am old enough and they elect me ædile!"

"Ah! Then at last my turn will come! You will let me fight then, won't you, Publius?"

Helene danced forth from her dressing-room in a chlamys made of Chinese silk from Alexandria, with a wreath of crimson flowers in her hair and a girdle that flashed fire as its opals caught the sunlight. She was better looking clothed; the drapery softened the lines of her too athletic figure and the wreath offset the hardness of her eyes—delicious dark-gray eyes that, nevertheless, could only half conceal the calculation in their depths. She was mentally weighing Tros.

She turned suddenly toward the Romans, laughing in their faces:

"Nobiles, who loves me? Who will hurry to the slave-market and buy Thracian grooms for my white team? Those Armenians I have are useless; I will sell them for farm-work."

There was a race to be first to find suitable Thracian slaves. The Roman youths cut short the courtesies and ran to find their chariots. Helene took Tros by the hand.

"And now those fools have gone we may talk wisdom," she said, looking almost modest. "Zeuxis tells me you have come from Britain and desire my influence—although I have not altogether understood him. Come."

She led into a room which formerly had been the atrium, which she had refurnished and disguised with hangings until it resembled nothing Tros had ever seen. There was crimson cloth with golden dragons; there were gilded cornices and curtains made from beads of ivory; the feet sank silently into rugs of amber and old-rose; the couches, the chairs and the very foot-stools were of ivory inlaid with gold. There was a smell of incense.

"Go!" she ordered, and the lurking slaves vanished.

Tros prodded the hangings. He opened a closet. He drew back the curtains that covered a doorway. He looked through the window and listened for breathing from behind some potted shrubbery through which he could not see. Then, striding to where she had thrown herself on an Egyptian couch of ivory and crimson cloth, he looked down at her dark eyes and, with his hands behind him, challenged her:

"I heard you say you wish to fight. Do you desire to fight me? With any weapon? With your wits?"

She shuddered.

"You look too much like Zeus!" she answered, rallying her impudence. "I understood you came to ask a favor of me."

"Whose slave are you?" he demanded.

She sat upright suddenly. She tried to look indignant but her eyes betrayed her; there was fear in their depths. She nearly spat the answer at him.

"I was born free! I am the daughter of Theseus the musician—"

"And was Theseus free?"

She nodded. Words were choking in her throat. Her fingers moved as if she sought a weapon.

"Since when were the musicians at the court of Ptolemy free men?" Tros asked. "I have seen you dancing at the court of Ptolemy. You are the girl who danced when Ptolemy Auletes played the flute. Are you Ptolemy's slave?"

"I am free!" she insisted. Coiled on the couch, looking up at him, she suggested a snake in the act of striking. All the laughter was gone from her eyes, all her impudence.

"I am a silent man," said Tros. "I listen."

He began to pace the floor, his hands behind him, presenting his broad back toward her as he turned, to give her time to recover her self-possession; but she had no sooner regained a little of it than he snatched it from her, to convert it to his own use.

"Understand!" He stood in front of her again. "No panic-stricken yielding that broods treachery! Use reason. Judge me, whether I am one whom you can sway; or whether I am one who will betray you, if you keep good faith."

"Master of men, you are cruel!"

"I am just," Tros answered. "I will do you no harm if you yield to me."

"My body?" Her eyes lighted; her lips quivered in the faint suggestion of a smile.

"That for it!" He snapped his fingers. Instantly her whole expression changed; resentful, sullen.

"What then?" she asked. "Yield what?"

"Your secret!"

"I have no secret. I am the daughter of—"

He stopped her with a gesture. "Shall I go?" he asked, and turned toward the door.

She flinched at the veiled threat—sprang from the couch and stood between him and the doorway.

"I have influence," she said. "I dare to fight you one way or the other! Knife against knife, or cunning against cunning! If we make a bargain, you shall keep your share of it or—"

Tros thrust his thumb into the little pocket in his tunic and drew out a pearl of the size of a pea—a rosy, lustrous thing that looked incongruous as he rolled it on the palm of his enormous hand. She curled her lip scornfully.

"I could have pearls from Pompey. I can have anything in Rome my heart desires."

But Tros produced another one, and then a third. Her eyes changed subtly, though she still defied him, standing like an Amazon at bay. Tros was watching her eyes.

"I gave nine of these to Zeuxis. You shall have eighteen."

"For my secret?"

"No. I know your secret. There is only one man who would dare to risk burning his fingers in your flame. You are Cæsar's spy."

"Liar! Rabirius sent me to Rome!"

Tros laughed. Rabirius was Cæsar's money-lender—possibly a third as rich as Crassus, with perhaps a thirtieth of Crassus' manhood—an avaricious rat with brains enough to recognize his limitations and not vie with great men but play into their hands and pocket fabulous commissions.

"Sit down!" Tros commanded, pointing to the couch. He returned the pearls to his pocket. Then, as she obeyed him, "Judge whether I know your secret"

She set her elbows on her knees and clasped her chin, staring at Tros as if he were a prophet reading off her destiny.

"Cæsar will need limitless fountains of money when he makes his bid to be the master of the world. He invaded Gaul to make a reputation and for practice in playing off men against men. He married his daughter to Pompey to keep Pompey quiet. He encouraged Crassus to make war on Parthia, that Crassus might bleed Italy of men and leave none but Pompey and the idle rich to stand between him and ambition. Seeing far into the future, he sent agents into Egypt who should stir the Alexandrians against their king. So the Alexandrians drove out Ptolemy; but it was too soon; Cæsar was not ready. Who was it then but Cæsar who, in return for a promise of seventeen million sesterces, agreed to defy the Roman senate and send Gabinius with troops from Syria to restore Ptolemy to the throne, along with Rabirius to control Ptolemy's exchequer? Now you say you are the agent of Rabirius. That may be. But I think you are the slave of Caius Julius Cæsar."

"What if I were? Is that your affair?" she answered.

"Aye! Cæsar might learn too easily what I intend! You may report to him about Rabirius. You may tell him all the secrets of these young patricians who babble their fathers' treacheries in your ears. But concerning me you will be as silent as the tomb in which they bury Vestal Virgins."

"Cæsar," she said, "is a terrible man to trifle with."

Tros nodded.

"Aye. I know him. His slaves keep watch on one another as well as on such Romans as he mistrusts and such provincials as he hopes to use. But since the gods, against my will, have guided me to your house, you shall run that risk of not informing Cæsar!"

"You will injure him?" she asked.

"Nay. I will let him conquer Rome and leave the Britons to themselves!"

"You are his friend?"

"I am here to save Britain from Cæsar."

Helene stood up, laughing, her eyes blazing. She defied him:

"Do you dare to kill me in my own house? How else shall you gag me now I know your secret?"

"Gag you? I will make you garrulous!" Tros answered. "You shall find a way to make me famous in a city where such infamy abounds that no voice can be heard above the din! To Cæsar you shall send word that Tros of Samothrace has prophesied Rome shall be his. Vanity may make him think he has persuaded me at last to love him."

"Many honest men love Cæsar," said Helene.

"Aye, and many love you," Tros answered, "but not I. You shall have your choice of playing my game or explaining what you are, and why you are in Rome, to Cato. Now choose!"

"Cato?" she answered. "Are you of Cato's party?"

"No," he answered, "but I have a speech for Cato's ear that shall include you one way or another. Shall I say you are the agent of Rabirius and Cæsar's spy—for I can prove it to him!—or—"

"Say Helene is your friend," she answered. "Cato is an old fool, but he is dangerous."

She looked keenly into Tros's eyes, and then laughed with a little breathless catch of nervousness:

"Tros, few in Rome would not like to say Helene is—"

"I am one of those few," Tros interrupted.

"Did you never love a woman?" she asked—curiously. His blunt rejection of her offer pleased her. By the light in her gray eyes he knew that she had made up her mind to conquer him.

"I am of Samothrace."

As he intended, she jumped to the conclusion he was an initiate under a vow to refrain from women.

"I will show you deeper mysteries than the Samothracian," she said with a confident toss of her chin and a laugh that had hypnotized many a man. "If I trust you, you must trust me."

"I have pearls. And you will do well to obey me," Tros retorted. "Be alone when I return from interviewing Cato."

CHAPTER LXXXV

MARCUS PORCIUS CATO

There are some men so enamored by a half-seen truth that they devote their energy to quarreling with untruth rather than to proving the little they do know. They are like slaves with fans, who drive out through one window flies that return through another. Stern men and unforgiving, they are so intent on punishing the evil-doer that they have no time to practise magnanimity. Such men forget, or never knew, that cruelty and justice mix no better than fire and water, but that one extinguishes the other, leaving cruelty or justice. I have never seen one such man who favored mercy rather than his own delight in the importance of his fear of self-respect. Self-importance gives them no time for importance.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Nowhere on earth was it easier to make mistakes than in Rome, nor more difficult to recover from them. It was a city where a man might do almost anything, including murder, with impunity, provided he went about it according to precedent and did lip-service to institutions and conventions. Above all, a foreigner needed discretion. Too often foreigners had trailed behind the chariots of Roman generals, in the celebration of those triumphs over foreigners that made Rome affluent; too many thousands of alien slaves were doing the work of animals and pandering to Rome's depravity; it was too usual to attribute treachery to foreigners in order to provide excuse for new campaigns, and it behooved the alien to study his deportment shrewdly, with an eye not only to the mob's continuously cultivated craving for excitement, but also to the prejudices of the privileged. Privilege was of the essence of Rome's government.

Aware of all that, nevertheless, Tros fell immediately foul of custom. Wishing to avoid curiosity that Orwic, with his fair moustache and unusual manners, almost certainly would have aroused, he accepted the use of Helene's litters and her personal attendants to convey him to the Forum, where Zeuxis assured him he would almost certainly find Cato.

He was conscious of having offended Zeuxis by not permitting him to overhear the conversation with Helene. He knew the Greek's mercurial temperament, as capable of malice as of generosity and of leaping in a moment from one extreme to its opposite. But he did not expect Zeuxis' resentment to be quite so swift. The malicious smile with which Zeuxis watched him get into the extravagantly decorated litter made no impression on him at the time.

"You will cause quite a flutter in Cato's bosom. There is nothing like a favorable introduction!" said the Greek.

And for a while it looked as if Zeuxis had meant exactly what he said. As the litters approached the city they became the objects of such attention that the liveried slaves had hard work to make progress through the crowd. Helene's notoriety had not been lessened, nor her popularity diminished by the recent brawling in the Forum for the right to walk beside her litter through the streets. Her recent offer to fight with net and trident in the Circus Maximus had become common gossip; it had been nobody's affair to circulate the news that the authorities had instantly forbidden such a scandalous proceeding. The crowd wanted to be scandalized and gloated at the prospect of Helene's doing it.

It was known too, that she had a four-horse team to enter in the races that would precede the three days' butchery of men and beasts in the arena; the possibility that she might drive the team herself had raised her popularity to fever-heat. The mere sight of her well-known litter forcing its way toward the Capitol was enough to block the narrow streets and draw attention even from the orators who were trying to work the crowd into electioneering frenzy wherever there was room for fifty men to stand and listen.

It was easy to see out through the litter-curtains, although next thing to impossible to recognize the litter's occupant, so all the way to the Forum Tros received the adulation that would have amused and thrilled Helene to the marrow of her being. It disgusted Tros. He loathed it. It revolted him to have to use a woman's notoriety to further his own plans. But it seemed safer to trust to Helene's influence than to make experiments with Rome's senators, or senators' wives, who might be less notorious but not less treacherous. No one—probably not even Cæsar—knew the long reach of Cæsar's spies and Cæsar's money.

But he hated the scent of the goose-breast-feather cushions. The stifling city smells annoyed him and the din of city traffic—street-vendors' cries, the tumult of electioneering factions skilfully incited to frenzy by men whose only claim to public office was cupidity and the ability to pay the necessary bribes, yells of the charioteers who found the street blocked, clangor of the armorers in dim basement workshops, hoarse pleadings of the auctioneers disposing of the loot from far-off provinces, shouts of the public announcers, the yelping of dogs and the overtone, blended of all of it:

"Buy! Buy! Buy!"

Rome was for sale to the craftiest bidder. That was the key to the din. The offspring of seventy races were hawking their hearts in the market, to the buyer with the keenest brain and longest pocketbook.

Midsummer heat had driven all who could afford it to the seaside or to mountain villas—that, and bedbugs incubated in the crowded, dark slave-quarters and the rack-rent tenements. The orators were well dressed. There were *equites* in dusty chariots arriving post-haste from the country to investigate alarming rumors, but the crowd had the shabby, ill-tempered appearance it assumes so swiftly when the fashionable element withdraws. Hot nights and too much politics—slaves overworked and free men unemployed—enormous and increasing wealth of one class, poverty and irresponsibility increasing for the other—corn-doles, open bribery, free entertainment at the expense of demagogues—postponement of the elections because the senate was afraid of mob-rule—Cæsar's agrarian laws designed to curry favor with the populace, and the impossibility of enforcing them in the face of the landowners' opposition, or of earning a living on the land in competition with the cheap slave-labor of the large estates, had all combined to arouse irritation, uncertainty and the expectation of a riot such as even Rome had never seen. Almost the air itself seemed ready to take fire. Men's faces wore the ugly look that precedes violence.

And Rome herself was ugly—drab with the color of smoky bricks and vegetable refuse—ugliness enhanced by the beginnings of adornment. There was marble here and there; and there were statues, some decapitated, some half hidden under crudely smeared electioneering posters, that suggested dignity forgotten. From between its ugly wooden scaffolding the marble of Pompey's enormous new theater shone in the baking sunlight, hinting at the only method by which

Rome was likely to emerge out of her filth. It was against the law to build a theater of anything but wood; so, as all men knew, including they who should enforce the law, Pompey was building behind screens of wood that should be torn down in a night at last and lay bare a magnificent defiance of the law. And all men knew that none, unless possibly Cato, would dare to call Pompey in question. Men laughed at the senate's helplessness, while they reviled the senate for not fostering tradition.

As the litters neared the Forum, where the shop-fronts and the open wine-shops looked drab in the dust from buildings being torn down by Cæsar's agents and the thud of falling masonry resounded like the tumult of a siege, the crowd grew denser. Roofs, temple steps, the shop-fronts, upper windows, all were thronged with agitated sightseers, some crying out the names of candidates for public office, some reviling Cato, others—evidently led by unseen agents—shouting for Pompeius Magnus and dictatorship.

The crowd was so dense that even two lictors preceding a prætor's deputy were brought to a halt. Rather than challenge the crowd in that temper they preferred to follow the two litters, for which the crowd made way. They recognized Helene's livery and there began to be an ovation. One of those strange moods that capture crises spread like a contagion; there was humor in the thought of humoring Helene, who had to stay at home three days because of gross infractions of the public peace of which she was the cause, and of dishonoring the prætor's representative.

The crowd, it seemed, was there to vilify the prætor—to inspire him with such dread as should prevent him from interfering with electioneering bribery. They began yelping at the lictors and at the sacred official who strode behind them with his toga concealing the lower half of his face. Then suddenly some genius conceived the thought that Helene had been arrested and was being brought before the prætor for examination. Mockery turned to anger. That was interference with the citizens' amusement and intolerable.

"Rescue her!"

The shout came from an upper window. It was echoed by a hundred voices from the street. Stones began flying, picked from the débris of the houses Cæsar's agents were demolishing. An angry faction, seizing opportunity to pounce on their political opponents, surged between the litters and the prætor's representative and in a second there was a street fight raging. The two lictors, theoretically sacred in their persons, raised their fasces over the official's head and hurried him to safety in the nearest house, while a troop of young patricians, asking nothing better than excuse to terrorize the mob, charged on horseback from a side-street in the direction of the Capitol. They were only armed with daggers but they swept the mob in front of them, and in a sort of back-eddy formed by that onslaught the two litters swayed into the Forum, where the bearers set them down beside a statue on which men swarmed and around which sweating men were packed like herrings in a barrel.

Tros emerged out of the litter and by sheer strength scuffled himself standing-room. He shouted to Orwic to stay where he was, but the Briton at the risk of daggers fought his way beside him. They were facing the temple of Castor and Pollux, whose platform was thronged with patricians, one of whom was trying to address the crowd while others roared for silence, and no single word could be distinguished from the din. There was a sea of arms and hot, excited faces where the patricians tried to win the mob's attention. On the opposite side of the Forum, where the shutters had been raised on money-changers' windows and every statue held its crowd of men like corpses on a gibbet, other orators were roaring themselves hoarse. There were cries of—

"Who defeated Spartacus?"

"Pompeius Magnus! Let him be dictator!"

"Who conquered Asia?"

"Pompeius Magnus!"

"Down with Cato! He assails our liberties!"

"Cæsar! Caius Julius Cæsar! The most generous, the most capable, the most glorious—Cæsar! Cæsar! Memmius!"

The last was Cæsar's candidate for consul.

Cheers, groans, cat-calls drowned the efforts of each faction to popularize their favorite. There were scuffles and fist-fights going on in thirty places simultaneously, but there was no room for a general mêlée; public peace was preserved by the utter impossibility of concerted action where men were fainting for lack of breathing room and could not rally to their friends or reach their enemies. A young patrician, standing high above the crowd's reach on the balustrade that flanked the temple platform, was amusing himself by flinging copper coins, but none dared stoop to pick them up for fear of being trampled underfoot. Six others in a group yelled "fire!" to try to cause a stampede, but that failed because it was impossible to move in any direction.

The only uninvaded steps were those of the prætor's office, guarded by a row of lictors, whose fasces, vertically held in front of them, were still such sacred symbols of Rome's majesty as even that crowd dared not violate. The building, wedged between the massive temple of Castor and Pollux and a smaller one, more delicately built, that showed the influence of Greece, was blunt, uncompromisingly Roman, dignified and solid, raised above the level of the Forum on a concrete base that formed the platform and provided cells for prisoners as well as offices. Its brick-work, unadorned since Sulla's day when the stucco had been damaged in the rioting and afterward removed entirely, gave a gloomy, ancient aspect to the building that was only partially brightened by the stucco columns recently erected to support a roof over the platform. On wooden boards on either side of the open door were public proclamations, and on the platform was a table and a chair, but no man seated at it. That platform was the only vacant space in sight; even the bronze beaks of the rostra, at the Forum's farther end, were invisible behind a swaying sea of faces.

Suddenly the din ceased. There was silence as if Rome had caught her breath. The hammering of demolition stopped abruptly and the dense crowd swayed as every face was turned toward the door of the prætorium.

"Cato!"

It was a murmur, but it filled the Forum. He came slowly through the open door, the purple border of his toga emphasizing the dignity and matter-of-factness of his stride. He had a tablet in his right hand, which he studied, hardly glancing at the crowd, and he appeared entirely to ignore the half-a-dozen men who followed him, three on either hand. He was a round-headed, obstinate looking veteran, in contrast to their elegance and air of self-advertisement; the more they postured and acknowledged themselves conscious of the crowd, the greater seemed his dignity.

"Citizens!" he said abruptly. Even breathing ceased. There was a dead, flat silence—noncommittal. No man seemed to expect pleasantries. "It is your inalienable privilege to elect the officials of the Republic by ballot. However, certain individuals, ambitious to hold office for their private gain, have set the disgraceful example of bribery, corrupting public morals and preventing the election of such candidates as will not, for the sake of honesty, or can not purchase votes. This scandal I regard it as my duty to abolish. There shall be no bribery while I am prætor. I have caused to be deposited with me by each of these candidates for office whom you see before you a sum of money from his private fortune which would ruin any of them should he forfeit it. This money will be forfeited into the coffers of the state in the event of proof of bribery. So cast your bollots at the time of the election honorably, as becomes a Roman citizen, each voting for that candidate who seems to him to merit confidence."

He made no gesture—simply turned, looked sharply at the six men on the platform, and strode sturdily in through the door.

There was a moment's silence, then a man laughed. Agitators, scattered at strategic intervals, cackled cynically until all the crowd was laughing. Cries from over near the rostra broke on the babeling din:

"This upstart believes he is Cato the Censor! He will abolish the games next! He will have us all eating turnips and wearing sackcloth!"

But the crowd, as volatile as mercury, had seen the humor of the situation. It turned its laughter on the candidates for office, booing them until they followed Cato in a hurry. There was a surge then as men were hustled off the rostra to make room for orators who sought with shout and gesture to claim the crowd's attention. But the mob would have none of them; it began melting, pouring along the Via Sacra, spreading the news of Cato's masterstroke and carrying the din of laughter down the narrow streets until all Rome seemed aroar with monstrous humor. Before Tros could straighten out his clothing, mussed by the crush of the crowd, the whole Forum was empty except for groups of arguing politicians. All except two of the lictors retired, and they sat at ease on stools on either side of the prætorium door.

"They are used to squalls—well used to them!" said Tros, and taking Orwic by the arm he bade the litter-bearers follow him to the prætorium steps and wait there.

As he reached the top step he met Cato face to face. The Roman, with only one slave following, stopped, framed in the doorway and stared at him hard, then glanced at the sumptuous litters and their slaves in Egyptian livery.

"Those slaves are better dressed than many a Roman," he remarked, with a sarcastic gesture answering Tros's salute. "Who are you?"

"Prætor, I am Tros of Samothrace. I seek audience with you alone."

Cato's florid, stubborn face grew wrinkled as a dry smile stole along his lips.

"You are an alien," he said. "You think the business of Rome may wait while I listen to your importunities?"

"Aye, let Rome wait!" Tros answered. "Cæsar has the reins of fortune in his hand."

"You are Cæsar's messenger?"

"I am Tros of Samothrace and no man's messenger. I seek an audience with you."

"Enter."

Cato turned his back and led the way along a narrow passage into a square room lined with racks on which state documents were filed with parchment labels hanging from them. There were several chairs, two tables and one secretary, bowed over a manuscript. Cato dismissed the secretary. He stared, glanced suddenly at Orwic and sat down.

"Be brief," he said abruptly.

Tros made no haste. He studied him, mistrusting ordinary methods. There was nothing subtle about Cato; the man's elementary simplicity and downrightness expressed themselves in every line. His windy gray eyes, steady and keenly intelligent, betrayed unflinching will. His wrinkles spoke of hard experience. The iron-gray hair, worn short, suggested a pugnacity that was confirmed by the lines of mouth and chin. His hands, laid calmly on his knees, were workmanlike, unjeweled, strong—incapable of treachery; the voice, well modulated, courteous but carrying a note of irony and incredulity.

A little too much bluntness and Cato would construe it as a challenge; the merest hint of subtlety and he would close his mind. Too much politeness would stir suspicion; rudeness he would take as an affront to Roman dignity. Exaggeration he would instantly discredit; under-statement he would construe literally. He was difficult. Tros would have preferred a man more vulnerable to emotion.

"I am from Britain," Tros remarked at last. "This is a prince of Britain." He nodded to Orwic, who saluted with aristocratic dignity.

"You have come in very gaudy litters," Cato answered. "Whose are they?"

"Helene's. Lacking other means of—"

"Can't you walk?" asked Cato. "I am prætor. I invariably walk."

"I can walk when I will," Tros answered. "Having no lictors to make me a way through the crowd I did well to borrow litters that the crowd would let pass. It is of no importance how I came. I will speak of Cæsar."

"You carry tales against him? I have heard them all," said Cato. He closed his mouth tight, as a man does when he reins impatient horses.

"I come to prevent Cæsar from invading Britain," Tros insisted, leaning forward to watch Cato's eyes. "If he succeeds against the Britons, what will be his next move? Rome."

Cato nodded. "Cæsar," he said, "is the first sober man who has designed to make himself the master of Rome. Sulla was a drunkard. So was Marius. Cæsar drinks deep of the hog-swill of flattery. He is drunk with ambition. But that does not give you the right to conspire against the Republic."

"I will help you against Cæsar!" Tros said, rising, and began to pace the floor, as always when he felt excitement surging in his veins. Three times he strode the room's full length and back again, his hands behind him, and then stood, looking into Cato's face.

"Alien," said Cato. "I am prætor. Cæsar is a Roman general."

Tros snorted.

"You split hairs of morality while Cæsar cuts throats! Listen! You love Rome, and you hate Cæsar. Not I. I haven't Rome to lose nor all the plunder of a hundred provinces to make me fearful. You set the welfare of the state above your own. I set the welfare of my friends above my own; and I love Britain, where a king lives whom I helped to resist Cæsar when he made his first raid on the island."

"Island?" said Cato. "We are told it is a mainland greater than all Gaul and Hispania."

"Mainland!" Tros snorted again. "A small, misty, wooded island, whose inhabitants can neither harm Rome nor enrich her treasury! A mere island, whose inhabitants are brave men. Cæsar, while he gains time, seeks to build a reputation. But I have heard how Cato, staunchest of all Romans, resolutely sets his face against wars when there is no excuse for war. They say there is no other public man who has dared to defy the Triumvirate. Therefore, I have made my way to Cato, at my own great risk."

"And the price?" asked Cato, looking sourly at him.

Tros exploded like a grampus coming up for air, then turned and paced the floor again.

"Cato!" he said, turning to him suddenly. "They packed you off to Cyprus to get rid of you, and all the world knows what happened. You found an island ruined by the money-lenders, and you left it in a fair way to recovery. I have heard how you flung the taunt in Pompey's face that, notwithstanding you dealt honestly, you brought more money back from Cyprus for the Roman treasury than Pompey brought from all his plundering of Asia. So you know what Roman rule means in the conquered provinces. I tell you, I have seen Gaul writhing under Cæsar's heel. Where I have known fair cities, there is wasted land and broken walls. I know a place where there are thirty thousand men who lack a right hand, simply because Cæsar is ambitious. I have seen the gangs of slaves go trailing out of Gaul to replace Romans on the farms of Italy and force your free men to enlist in Cæsar's and Crassus' legions. And you ask me my price?"

Cato eyed him undisturbed, his hands palms downward on his knees. No gesture, not a fleeting trace of an expression betrayed what thought was passing through his mind.

"Give me the right to call myself Cato's friend!" Tros urged, lowering his voice dramatically. "If I thought Rome held a hundred Catos, I would—"

Cato interrupted.

"Your opinion of me is unimportant. I am the prætor. That woman, Helene, whose litters you use, is a prostitute. You flaunt her impudence in Rome's face."

"Prostitute?" Tros retorted. "All Rome is given to prostitution! What does one more matter? I am told you wish to prosecute Rabirius for his chicanery in Egypt. Leave Helene to me and I will strip Rabirius as naked as when he yelled himself into the world! I will prove to you Cæsar supported him, prompted him, pocketed a fat percentage of the money he stole and now makes use of Helene to watch Rabirius—and you—and others. She is one of Cæsar's ablest spies. Touch her, and you bring down Cæsar on your head! Leave her to me, and I will hamstring Cæsar! Give me ten days, and you shall know about the war that Cæsar plans!"

Cato took a tablet from the table and wrote swiftly. Then he laid the tablet back, face downward on the table.

"Cæsar has authority," he said, "to declare war or to make peace in Gaul."

"Britain is not Gaul," Tros answered. "Neither is Rome Gaul."

Cato rapped the table with his knuckles. The secretary entered, took the tablet and went out again.

"Cæsar has reported to the senate," said Cato, "that the Britons are constantly helping the Gauls to rebel."

"In the name of all the gods, why not?" Tros thundered at him. "Should a brother not defend his brother? There are Gauls and Britons who belong to the same tribe, share the same king and till land on both sides of one narrow sea. And did your ancestor sit idle when Hannibal invaded Italy, because forsooth, he had not yet reached Rome? Do you, another Cato, wish to grovel before Cæsar? He will use the strength of Gaul and Britain against Rome, when he has glutted his ambition in that corner of the world. He is a madman! Stir up Gaul behind him! Let Gauls and Britons learn that there are men in Rome who sympathize. Give them but that much encouragement,"—he snapped his fingers—"and Cæsar shall have his hands full!"

Cato, spreading out his knees with both hands resting on them, leaned back; he had done with arguing.

"'No Roman prætor can lend his influence to the defeat of Roman arms," he said. "But I will do what can be done to bring the senate to a proper view of these things—"

"Phaugh!" Tros's fist went like a thunder-clap into his palm. "And two-thirds of the senators accepting Cæsar's bribes! The other third opposing him because they think Pompey might put more money into their pockets! Cato, do you set this wolf-brood's appetite above fair dealing? Are you—"

"I am a Roman," said Cato.

"You shall see Rome fawning at Cæsar's feet!" Tros answered, his eyes glowing like a lion's.

The line of Cato's lips grew tighter and then flickered in a hard smile.

"And by whose authority do you come here, riding in prostitutes' litters to hurl threats at me?" he asked. "Are you a Roman citizen?"

"I come by Cæsar's leave," Tros answered, pulling out a parchment from his breast. He flourished it indignantly. He showed the seal and signature. "I won it! Three times I have had the best of Cæsar and—"

He checked himself, aware that he had lost his self-control, whereas the Roman had not.

"Well—and what?" asked Cato.

But the thought that had flashed across Tros's mind was nothing he could safely tell to any one of Cato's unimaginative temper; even in the heat of indignation he knew better than to run that risk.

"And I will save Britain from him," he said lamely. Then, recovering his self-possession, "You go prattle to the senate—if you can make them listen without paying them to sit still!"

He saluted in the Roman fashion and Cato stood up to return the salute with an air of being glad the interview was over. He ignored Orwic—merely nodded to him, as he might have done to a familiar slave, and Orwic flushed, not being used to rudeness even from his equals. As they left the room the Briton growled in Tros's ear—

"Is that truly one of Rome's great men?"

"Rome's greatest! Iron-headed, and as blind as a boulder resisting the sea! Born out of his time! He loves the Rome that died before the days of Marius and he is mad enough to think Cæsar can be tamed by quoting law! I have a thought, though."

For a minute Tros stood gazing at the Forum and its groups of politicians vehemently gesturing. Helene's eunuch bowed. He waved the man away.

"I will walk. Here—" He tossed him money. "Tell your mistress to expect me." Then, as he took Orwic's arm and they descended the steps together, "I have a thought that quarrels with inclination. I must study it. Keep silence."

Side by side they walked along the Via Sacra between rows of graceless statues, Orwic copying the stride that gave the Romans dignity when dignity of motive was the last thing in their minds. Tros strode like Hercules, observing nothing, with a frown above his eyes like brooding thunder.

"Of what do you think?" Orwic asked him at last, when they had bumped into so many people that apology had grown monotonous.

"Of my father's prophecy," Tros answered. "With his dying breath he foretold I should struggle against Cæsar but that I should serve him in the end."

"Against Britain?" Orwic asked, startled, puzzled.

"Nay. He knew I will betray no friendships. But—why not against Rome? Do you and I care whether Rome licks Cæsar's feet? This Tiber-wolf bred Cæsar—let the cub's teeth make her suffer for it! If we offer Rome to Cæsar he may turn his fangs away from Britain!"

"If we offer to do it he can laugh," said Orwic. "How can two-and-thirty men give Rome away?"

"The gods give and the gods take," Tros retorted. "Men are agents of the gods."

"But who knows what the gods intend?"

Tros turned that over in his mind a minute, doubting nothing except whether words could possibly convey his meaning to a man whose language he had learned but recently.

"The gods—they know," he said at last. "Men guess. And he who guesses rightly there and then becomes the edged tool of the gods."

"But how guess?" Orwic wondered. "If we had a druid with us—"

"He could tell us no more than we see," Tros interrupted. "Let us see Rome. If the heart is rotten, let us foretell death or a physician. I believe the gods purge evil with its offspring, and it may be Rome is ripe for Cæsar, who will be a drench that will burn Rome's belly. He may fail. She may vomit him out. She may swallow and smother him. Murder—"

"But—but—"

Orwic stared at the crowd—three-fifths of them slaves from the ends of the earth—for the Romans were taking their ease in the midsummer heat. Even the half empty streets sent up a roar like the voice of a cauldron, and the baking heat suggested future on the forge. There was a thunder where the rubbish of demolished buildings tumbled down the wooden chutes into the carts. The sun shone through a haze of dust and, as the wind whipped up a cloud of it, there came down a narrow street, like specters, nearly a hundred men all chained together, staggering under blocks of marble.

"Those are Jews," said Tros. "They are the fruit from Pompey's harvest in Jerusalem. Unless you and I act wisely we shall see Caswallon led in triumph, and the Britons building Cæsar's Rome under the whip."

He was talking merely to keep Orwic silent. He wanted to think. He stood frowning, staring at the most dignified building in old Rome—the temple of the goddess Vesta, with the residence of the Vestal Virgins close behind it and, beyond that, the official home of the Pontifex Maximus.

CHAPTER LXXXVI

JULIUS NEPOS

I have used life wondering at marvels—aye, and looking for them. But I know no greater marvel than the virtue readily discernible in some men, whose calling is vile. Their vileness is beyond coping with; it would be wiser to swim in Leviathan's sea and try to couzen him, than to bargain with such men's vileness. For they know their vileness and they understand its channels; he who understands it not is as a sheep to a wolf. But their virtue to them is precious, and they understand it not. Touch such men's virtue and uncomprehending they respond, as a blind ship responds to a touch of the helm though all the gales of Neptune buffet and her nature bids her drift before them.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Tros led on, ignoring the crowd; but even in polyglot Rome there were limits to the strangeness that could pass without exciting notice. If they had been slaves no citizen would have lowered himself by paying them attention, but they took the middle of the way like noblemen, although no servants followed to protect them from assault or from the importunities of wounded veterans.

So they were followed by small boys, who mimicked Tros's herculean swagger and made moustaches for themselves of street dirt out of compliment to Orwic. Traders tried to drag them into shops where Crassus' oriental plunder was beginning to seek sale. They were bellowed at by leather-lunged slaves who stood on stone blocks advertising brothels. Insolent gangs of gladiators in the pay of men grown newly rich called to them out of wine-shops, where maimed ex-soldiers clamored for the dregs of each man's drink. They were pestered by touts from lawless gambling-dens, thieves' auctions and even by slaves who were trying to sell themselves.

It was hours before Zeuxis found them, still wandering about Rome, visiting the temples and the great wooden arenas where the gladiators practised, under the eyes of gamblers studying their chances and the betting odds. Zeuxis arrived on foot, sweat running from him, breathless and so agitated he could hardly speak. His slaves supported him, wiping his face with handkerchiefs until he thrust them aside at last and, stepping between Tros and Orwic, seized Tros's arm.

"What have you done? What have you done? One day in Rome and this already! They have seized Helene! She was taken by the prætor's men! They wrapped her in a hood for fear the crowd might recognize her. One of her slaves followed and declares he saw her hustled into the prætor's prison. There is a guard put on her house and men are searching it! A few of her slaves have run, but most of them are lined up in the garden, telling all they know. It was by the merest luck the prætor's men did not find me in the house—I had just left. One of the slaves escaped and overtook me. I have found you by describing you to people in the street and—gods of Hellas!—what a wanderer you are! I have followed you all over Rome."

Tros tried to calm him, but the Greek appeared to have no nerve left. He said he did not even dare to return home until he knew the prætor's men were not invading his house. He had sent a slave to see.

"They have no right to interfere with me—I am a Roman citizen, but a man's rights— Tros, Tros, you have brought me ill luck!"

"Where shall we go?" Tros asked. A crowd was gathering. "If they should find my Northmen at your house—"

"That's it, that's it!" exclaimed Zeuxis, wringing his hands. "Your wretched, bearded, battle-axing, drunken, quarrelsome barbarians! The prætor will accuse me—here, this way!"

Slapping a slave's wrist, who tried to calm him with affectionate remonstrances, he slipped through the crowd and led, panic-stricken, down a dozen evil-smelling lanes where the rubbish from tenements was dumped and mangy dogs snarled at the passer-by, until at last an alley opened into a nearly circular space that had been repaved with rubble from an ancient wall. There was a well in the center, protected by masonry constructed from the fragments of crude statuary, and though the buildings around the inclosure were tidy enough and there were no heaps of stinking garbage, they were mean, small, solidly and crudely built, with heavy, tall flat stones instead of arches over all the doors. It was a section of the oldest part of Rome.

Zeuxis struck at a door whose cypress planks were scarred by a hundred years of violence. He struck repeatedly, but faces peered through many a narrow window before the door was opened cautiously and a man thrust out his head. He had iron-gray whiskers that met underneath his chin. Chin and upper-lip were shaven. His nose was discolored by crisscross purple veins. Extremely bright eyes glittered from under shaggy brows and his gray head, bald in the middle, was like a tangled mop.

"Zeuxis?" he said. "Volatile, venomous, vicious, effeminate—enter! You would never come here unless you were in trouble!

Come in and amuse me. I suppose you have offended Cato. I know Cato better than to try to coax him, but you may as well tell me the news—the news—the news."

His voice echoed under the vaulted ceiling of a passage lighted dimly by one candle stuck on an iron bracket. On the walls of the passage were weapons, shields, helmets; some seemed to have come from the ends of the earth; there were Parthian scimitars, clubs studded with iron, three-headed spears and wave-edged daggers, long-handled hooks for dragging down a horseman, nets, tridents and swords by the dozen, of every imaginable shape and length.

Fire glowed on a hearth in a room at the end of the passage. There was something cooking on the coals and acrid smoke, that made the eyes smart, clouded among beams from which hung odds and ends of recently washed clothing. On the walls of the room hung garments of extraordinary richness, gruesomely suggestive of the spoils of horrible victories—more weapons—and a brazier in a corner, with an iron of peculiar shape beside it. Over the hearth, where smoky images of wax stood on a shelf in gloom, was an extremely heavy, short, broad-bladed sword. There were benches and a table, but the furniture was meager, unpainted and such as the poorest citizen of Rome might have possessed.

"I introduce you to Julius Nepos," said Zeuxis, seeming to recover self-possession when the old man slammed the door and bolted it. The only light came from the smoky hearth and from a window, high up in the wall, which seemed to open on a courtyard. The heat was so great that the candles set on brackets on the walls had drooped in drunken curves and there was tallow on the flag-stone floor beneath them.

Tros bowed and Orwic copied him, but both men felt an impulse of reserve. Old Nepos noticed it.

"Be seated," he said gruffly. "I have cut the heads off nobler men than you. I have slain kings."

He seemed to think that made him anybody's equal. He glanced at the garments that hung on the walls—his perquisites; and having laid claim to distinction, he grew genial and grinned—pulled off his sandals and shirt, revealing a torso and arms like Vulcan's, all lumpy with muscle, the color of bronze, and sat down on a creaking bench.

"This is the man," said Zeuxis, "who refused to be Sulla's headsman and yet Sulla spared him. He was formerly the chief instructor of the public gladiators, and not even Sulla dared to—"

"Oh yes, he did," Nepos interrupted. "He deprived me of my privileges. I might have starved; only when Cato became prætor he ordered Sulla's informers rounded up; and then he sent for me and had me cut the heads off most of them—a miserable brood! —nine-and-thirty in one afternoon, and a pleasanter death than they earned! If Cato had listened to me they would have died in the arena, fighting one another, with the beasts to clean up the survivors; but Cato thought they were too cowardly, although I told him a hot iron will make anybody fight. So I beheaded them. I killed two hundred and eleven altogether, and good riddance!"

His face looked something like a satyr's as he leaned forward to observe Tros. There were no signs of ferocity about him—rather of a philosophic humor, slightly cynical but tolerant. He struck the table with his fist and called for wine, which was brought in by a woman less agreeable to look at than himself. She had thick lips and most of her teeth were missing; her figure was shapeless, her arms like a fighting man's and her greasy hair like Medusa's. But it was good wine; and she provided lumps of bread to eat with it, breaking them off from the loaf with fingers that looked capable of tearing throats.

"And so now you are in trouble," remarked Nepos, eyeing Zeuxis comically. "You believe because I am a friend of Cato I can get you out of it. Isn't that so? Well, I tell you Cato doesn't like you, Zeuxis. Has he caught you cheating the public treasury over some contract for a spectacle?"

"He has arrested Helene," said Zeuxis.

Nepos suddenly sat upright, swallowed wine and snapped his mouth shut.

"So it is Cato who is in trouble, is it?" he said. "Obstinate old tamperer with hot irons! Fool! She'll wreck him! The mob loves her. What will he do—have her thrown to the beasts? Old imbecile! They'll leave the benches and throw Cato in in place of her! There are some things Cato can't do, prætor though he is."

"How teach him?" wondered Zeuxis.

"Oh, he's teachable," said Nepos. "You couldn't have taught

Sulla anything, or Marius—and Pompey won't learn nowadays, since flattery went to his head. But you can teach Cato what the crowd will have and what it won't have. Cato believes in the voice of the people. He'll hear it! As I've told him often, all they care for is money, doles of corn and entertainment. Cato sat there, on that bench, last night. He likes me because I talk good sense and never flatter him.

"I like Cæsar, who knows how to rule; but I told Cato now is the time to throw in his lot with Pompey, and increase corn-doles and give astonishing spectacles, if he hopes to stand in Cæsar's way. But Cato hates Pompey nearly as much as he does Cæsar, so that's mutual. Pompey detests him for going bare-footed and poking his nose into public accounts. So he has bagged Helene, has he? Well, we'll have to save him from that predicament! You can't tell me Helene isn't Cæsar's woman. Cæsar can't afford to let his spies become disorganized. He'll kill Cato! He hates him. He'd love an opportunity to turn on him. Cato is a fool. I love him better than a brother, but he's a fool—he's a fool—he's an old fool—and that's worse than a young one!"

Zeuxis shrugged his shoulders.

"He is honest, which is much the same thing!"

"No, he isn't," said Nepos. "He is proud and obstinate. There's no such thing as honesty."

There came a hammering at the outer door and Nepos' wife admitted one of Zeuxis' slaves, who delivered his news breathlessly:

"The prætor's men have not come near the house. But the freedman Conops went to Ostia, so now there is none who can control the lord Tros's barbarians, who are afraid because of their master's absence and are threatening to go and look for him."

Instantly Julius Nepos seemed to throw off twenty years. His muscles tautened. Even his voice grew younger:

"Barbarians? What sort?" he asked. He glanced shrewdly at Orwic, who resented the appraisal and frowned haughtily. Tros sat still, acutely conscious of a tingling in his spine. It was Zeuxis who answered:

"Northmen—whatever that is. They are a breed never before seen in Rome, having red beards; and they fight with axes. But some are Britons and resemble Gauls. That one"—he pointed at Orwic—"is a prince among the Britons."

"Are they free men?" Nepos asked.

Instantly Tros lied to save them. If he had answered they were free men, nothing would have been more simple than to bring some charge against them. Then, as aliens unrepresented by an influential advocate, they might be condemned and sentenced to the arena.

"Slaves," he remarked, compelling his voice to sound casual. But his fist was clenched and Nepos noticed it.

"I have seen too many die, not to know when a man is afraid, friend Tros," he said, a lean smile on his face. "Good gladiators bring a high price. Men who fight with axes would be something new. They might be matched against the Mauritanians. Pompey would buy them. It would be a short way into Pompey's favor. That way we could approach Pompey, who is difficult to reach. We might persuade him; he would be glad to make trouble for Cato. And by releasing Helene he would again put Cæsar under obligation."

Zeuxis chuckled. His superficial subtlety was stirred by Nepos' argument; he saw all sides of it, if not the inside.

"Dionysus! Excellent! Nothing ever was more accurate! Julius Nepos, you are fit to govern Rome, you understand Pompey and Cæsar so well! Tros, have you not understood him? Pompey and Cæsar lavish favors on each other, while they watch each other like cat and dog. Each hopes to be able to accuse the other of ingratitude when the time comes that they quarrel openly at last. Pompey will compel Cato to set Helene free, and he will tell all Rome he did it to oblige Cæsar. He likes nothing better then to get Cato into difficulties with the Roman mob, because he knows that if it weren't for Cato's blunders and lack of tact the old man might be dangerous. Pompey will jump at it! Sell him your Northmen, Tros!"

Zeuxis leaned back and enjoyed the alarm that Tros could not conceal. He knew the Northmen were not slaves. He knew Nepos—understood the old man's combination of ferocity and amiable instinct.

But Tros's subtlety could under-dig the Greek's. He was at bay.

He had his men to save, which stirred his wits. And he was not afraid Zeuxis would utterly betray him so long as there were pearls to be obtained by other means than downright treachery.

"The notion is good," he said, rising. "I will visit Pompey. Where is he?"

"As I told you, his wife is ill. You will have to drive out to his country villa, where senators wait at the gate like slaves for the chance of a word with him."

"No," said Nepos. "Pompey comes to Rome to-night. How do I know? Never mind. There are those who must go to Pompey and beg favors; but there are others whom not even Pompey the Great dares refuse if they send for him, no matter at what hour."

"The Vestal Virgins," Zeuxis said, and shuddered. "May the gods protect us from entanglements with them! This mob, that worships venery, adores those virgins and will kill you if they frown. But what should Pompey have to do with them?"

"Doubtless he brings gifts. Possibly he begs a favor for his wife," said Nepos; but he did not look as if he thought that was the reason. He was sly eyed.

"Where will he lodge?" Tros asked him.

"In his own house. Look you now—men have made worse friends than myself, and I love Cato, who is much too obstinate a man to be persuaded. We must get that Helene out of Cato's hands, if we want to keep Cato from being mobbed. Once or twice already they have nearly killed him because he did something stupid—once it was closing the brothels and once it was stopping payment of illegal bills on the treasury. So if you want my friendship, go you to Pompey and ask him to overrule Cato. You will either have to flatter him or buy him. Better both! For twenty gladiators of a new breed he would give you almost anything you ask. Cato will yield; he will have to. That will save his skin, which is what I want, and it may also force him into Pompey's camp, which would be good politics. But never mind politics. Get Helene released and you'll find my friendship worth more to you than Pompey's or any other man's in Rome."

Tros had made up his mind. Orwic, who had learned to recognize the symptoms, strode to the door and opened it. Tros, with a jerk of his head, beckoned Zeuxis. The Greek, too, recognized finality.

"Zeus sneezes and the earth quakes!" he remarked, then took his leave of Nepos, winking and making suggestive movements with his hand when he was sure Tros could not see what he was doing. Nepos' face as he answered Tros's salute was an enigma.

It was dark when they emerged out of the maze of lanes into a street. Torches were already breaking up the gloom where gallants swaggered to some rendezvous amid a swarm of their retainers. The city's voice had altered from the day din to the night roar; it suggested carnival, although there was no merrymaking in the streets; whoever had no bodyguard slunk swiftly through the shadows. Bellowing voices on the stone blocks under yellow lamps announced attractions within walls; the miserable eating-houses and the wine-shops did a thronging trade; but the streets were a danger zone, dagger-infested, along which the prosperous strode in the midst of armed slaves and whoever else ventured went swiftly from shelter to shelter. Dawn never broke but saw the slaves of the *municipium* pick up dead bodies in the street.

"To your house," Tros commanded, as if giving orders from his own poop, and Zeuxis led the way, his five slaves, fussily important, doing their utmost to make the party look too dangerous to interfere with.

But Zeuxis was in no mood to dispute the right of way with any Roman gallant and his gladiators. At the sight of any group of men approaching he turned instantly down side-streets. He preferred to risk a scuffle with the unattached ruffians who made a living by taking one side or the other in the riots that the politicians staged whenever a court decision or a ruling of the senate upset calculations. Such men seldom attacked any one unless paid to do it. Gladiators who attended gallants on their way to dissolute amusement flattered their owners' vanity by bullying any group they met less numerous or pugnacious than their own.

So they were a long time reaching the bridge that crossed the Tiber, and had splashed into many a pool of filth besides unconsciously assuming the rather furtive air that strategy of that sort imposes on pedestrians. The five slaves altogether lost their arrogance. In the glare of the lanterns at the guard-house at the bridge-foot, where the stinking empty fish-boxes were piled and the boatmen slept like corpses on the long ramp leading to the quay, they made no deep impression on the guards of the *municipium.*

"Halt there! Stand aside and wait!"

A gruff ex-legionary, leaning on a spear and leering with the easy insolence acquired in six campaigns, made a gesture that brought six more spearmen into line behind him, barring the narrow approach to the bridge. Over beyond the river there was torchlight. There came a trumpet call. It was answered by shouts from guards stationed at intervals along the parapet in impenetrable darkness. Lights on the bridge were forbidden.

Then another trumpet call. Presently a stream of torchlight flowed on to the bridge, its glare reflected in the water. Fire laws, or any other laws, are subtly honored when the famous disobey them.

"Who comes? Pompey!" said the spearman, grinning into Tros's face. "Better get out of the way, my friend!"

His insolence was tempered by familiarity. He seemed to recognize in Tros an old campaigner like himself. Though Tros stood still, he made no effort to enforce the order, merely moving his head sidewise, curiously, to observe him with a better slant of light. The wooden bridge began to thunder to the tramp of men all breaking step.

"Let us stand back in the shadow!" Zeuxis whispered and set the example, followed by his slaves, but Tros remained facing the spearman and Orwic, arms folded, stood with him.

"Are you one of Pompey's veterans by any chance?" the spearman asked. "Take my advice, friend. This is a poor place and a poor time to approach him."

"He expects me," Tros answered and the spearman stared at him with new appreciation.

"You are either over-bold or more important than you look with that small following," he said. "We will see. We will see. I have seen strange happenings in my day."

Tros turned to Orwic and spoke quietly in Gaulish:

"When the lictors order us to stand aside, keep place abreast of me."

A horse's head—a phantom in the torchlight—tossed above the lictors' fasces. Dimly, behind them, more horses appeared, and streams of men on foot, like shadows, with the torchlight shining here and there on armor or an ornament; but there was silence except the groaning of the bridge's timbers and the echoing tramp of feet. There was a sense of mystery—or portent.

Suddenly the man in front of Tros threw up his spear and swung the men behind him into line, facing the roadway. They stood rigidly, like statues, as the lictors, two lines of four in single file, advanced with all the dignity attainable by human symbols of authority in motion. Stately, measured, neither slow nor fast but like the passing of the hours into eternity, they strode toward Tros, and he was no such fool as to attempt to let the two files pass on either hand. Though Rome was rotten at the core, that very fact increased insistence on respect for the tokens of her magistracy. To have dared to stand ground would have meant, more likely than an interview with Pompey, a cudgeling and then a ducking in the Tiber. He shouted before they reached him.

"Pompeius Magnus, hail!"

His voice was like a captain's on his poop—resounding, sudden, vibrant with assurance. There was something of a gong note in it.

"I am Tros of Samothrace!"

"Halt!" said a bored voice and a dozen men repeated the command. There was a rush of footmen to surround the leader's horse, then silence so tense that the swirling of the river past the bridge-piles struck on the ear like music.

Torches moved, swaying confusedly. Pompey, his cloak thrown back so that torchlight gleamed on the gold inlay of his breastplate, leaned forward on his horse, shielding his eyes with his right hand.

"Who did the man say he is?"

"I am Tros of Samothrace."

"I believe I remember him. Let him approach."

Two lictors lined up, one on either side of Tros; two more opposed themselves to Orwic and prevented him from following. Tros was marched to about half a spear's length from Pompey's stirrup, where the lictors signed to him to stand still and a dozen faces peered at him.

"Is this an omen, Tros?" asked Pompey in a pleasant, cultured voice suggestive of half humorous contempt for his surroundings. "I remember you. I gave your father leave to use all Roman ports. I trust he has not misused that privilege."

"He is dead," said Tros. "I have word for your private ear."

"All Rome has that!" said Pompey. "I am pestered with communications. However, I will hear you. What is it?"

"Secret as well as urgent. Name place and hour and let me speak with you alone. I seek nothing for myself."

"Rare individual! *Comites,"* * said Pompey, laughing in the patronizing way of men who have been flattered until all comment becomes condescension, "here is a man who has sufficient. He asks nothing! Envy him! So many of us have too much!"

He stared at Tros, signing to some of the slaves to move the torches so that he could better read his face. His own was pouched under the eyes but rather handsome in a florid, heavy, thick-set way. His eyes glittered. The lips curled proudly, and he sat his horse easily, gracefully, with rather portly dignity. He looked as if success had softened him without his being aware of it, but there were no signs of debauch.

"You may follow," he said, "and I will hear you when I have time."

But Tros had cooled his heels once too often in the anterooms of Alexandria, where Ptolemy's eunuchs pocketed the fees of applicants, kept them waiting and dismissed them without audience, to be pigeon-holed as easily as that. His sureness that the gods were all around him made him no cringing supplicant.

"You may listen or not, as you please, Pompeius Magnus. I have crossed two seas to speak with you. Name me an hour and a place, or I will find another who will listen."

Pompey legged his horse to hide astonishment. In all Rome there was only Cato who had dared to affront him since Crassus went away. A handsome youngster strode into the torchlight and stood swaggering in front of Tros.

"Do you know to whom you speak?" he demanded.

"Please, Flavius! Stand aside!" said Pompey, reining his horse toward Tros again. "This may prove interesting. Tros, do you know where the temple of Vesta stands? Approach me there, after the morning ceremony. Forward!"

The two lictors hustled Tros aside. The bridge began to tremble as the march resumed and Pompey passed on into darkness, torchlight gleaming on the shield and helmet carried for him by a slave in close attendance.

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* Comrades.

"You are mad!" remarked Zeuxis, striding gallantly enough out of the shadow when the last of the long cortege had streamed by and a roar in the narrow city streets announced that Pompey, recognized already, was receiving an ovation. "If you go to the temple of Vesta Pompey will offer you employment, for the sake of obtaining your Northmen and Britons, about whom Nepos certainly will tell him before midnight. And if you refuse, he will seize your men for the arena. He will throw you into prison if you make the least fuss; he will simply say you are the enemy of Rome. You are as mad as Cato himself! You should have won his favor while you had the opportunity."

"You will do well if you earn mine!" Tros retorted, visibly annoyed. "Lead on."

Zeuxis fell into stride beside him but there was no more talk until they came to Zeuxis' house. Relationship of host and guest was obviously superficial now. Neither man trusted the other. Even Orwic, who could understand no word of Greek or Latin, realized that Zeuxis' house had turned into a place of danger rather than a refuge.

CHAPTER LXXXVII

VIRGO VESTALIS MAXIMA

How I wonder at the credulous who think their impudence endows them with all knowledge! So vast is their credulity that if they hear of something that they understand not, they declare it is not. Such is their credulity that they believe their senses. But they disbelieve in spirit, though they see death all around them and not even their ignorance pretends to know what breathed the life into that which dies when the breath is withdrawn.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Tros wished now he had come to Rome without his men—even without Orwic. He would have been safer without them. He could easily have hired two dozen Romans to act as bodyguard; he might even have bought gladiators; there were second-hand ones, maimed, that could be bought cheap. But all those possibilities had occured to him before he left his ship, outside Tarentum Harbor, and his real reason for bringing both Northmen and Britons remained as important as ever; they were hostages.

However much he trusted Sigurdsen, he knew he could better trust him not to sail away and turn to piracy so long as eight of his nearest relatives and a dozen other countrymen were ashore and counting on him to keep tryst. The Britons on the ship were not particularly loyal to Orwic; they might not hesitate to leave him languishing on foreign soil; but the Northmen were as loyal to one another as even Tros himself could be to any man who served him honestly.

But that consideration made it all the more essential to save the men he had with him. If they should lose their lives in a fair fight, that might strengthen the bond between him and their relatives on board the ship, it being Northman aspiration to die fighting; but to lose them like a dunder-headed yokel choused out of his wares would be an insult and a breach of trust for which no Northman would forgive him any more than he, Tros, could forgive himself.

He could see through Zeuxis' subtlety. He suspected the Greek had all along known that the prætor's men were nowhere near his house. Zeuxis might have staged that panic in order to introduce Nepos, who, he probably felt sure, would try to get Tros's Northmen for the school of gladiators. Should Tros's men be seized on some pretext, it would be a typical Greek trick to ask for pearls with which to purchase their release. And no bag of pearls would be deep enough. He saw through Zeuxis.

That being so, he surprised him. He preferred, if destiny intended he should lose his men, to do the thing himself, and blame himself, rather than enrich a treacherous acquaintance—and the more so when suspicion was corroborated by the Northmen after he reached Zeuxis' house.

He went straight to the Northmen's quarters. There were lodged in a barn between the cow-byre and the long, low, crowded sheds in which the Greek's slaves lived. When he aroused them from sleep they reported there had been no difficulties such as Zeuxis' slave had spoken of. They had not feared for Tros. They hardly knew he was away. Some slave-women who knew Gaulish had made love to them and tried to persuade them to get drunk. But they had kept their promise and behaved themselves, suspecting trickery. Besides, they had not known when Tros might need their services, so they had slept whenever visitors would let them. Between times they had mended footgear, persuading the Britons to do the same thing, to keep the Britons out of mischief.

There was nothing to be done with the weapons or baggage but to leave them all in Zeuxis' charge. Tros did not dare to enter Rome with armed men at his back. Not even Pompey would have let his followers wear more than daggers openly, when they were once inside the city walls, unless the senate should expressly grant permission—not that Pompey cared a copper *as* * for what the senate thought, but to have done so would have been tantamount to a declaration that he had assumed the sole dictatorship—which would have brought Cæsar hurrying from Gaul to wrest it from him.

So Tros told the Northmen to hide daggers in their tunics and make bundles of their other weapons to be left wherever Zeuxis cared to stow them. He disarmed the Britons altogether, since he could not depend on them to keep their heads in an emergency. Then, telling each man to equip himself with a flask and haversack, he bribed Zeuxis' steward heavily to serve out rations for a day or two. Experience had taught him that the Northmen's zeal depended on their stomachs much more than was the case with men from southern lands. Well fed, he would have dared to lead them against twice their tale of Roman legionaries; hungry, they would run away from ghosts.

Then he went to his room and dressed himself in his gorgeous oriental cloak and Grecian tunic, presently joining Zeuxis at the supper-table, where they were waited on by girls—descendants of the decadents who ruined Greece. It was the steward, whispering, who broke the news to Zeuxis that Tros's men were ready for a night-march.

"You desert me?" Zeuxis asked, with viperish resentment in his voice. But he was not so startled that he did not gesture to a slave-girl to pay Tros more intimate attention. "Surely you will sleep here? You can leave at dawn and be at the shrine of Vesta before Pompey reaches it."

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* The smallest coin in circulation.

"If I should wait, I would have more to beg of Pompey than I care to crave from any man," Tros answered. "Guard my baggage, Zeuxis, and remember—I have promised you nine pearls on a condition. If I fail, or if you fail me, though I had to throw a thousand pearls into the Tiber I would take care you should get none! I perceive your friendship is a purchasable merchandise. I bid high, and I paid you half down when we struck the bargain."

Zeuxis' lustrously immoral eyes were looking at Tros's cloak. As plainly as if speech had said it, he was wondering where so great a weight of pearls was hidden. The lust that jewels have the power to arouse in some men, and some women, burned behind the Greek's eyes. The smile that stole over his face was like a mask deliberately chosen—thoughtfully adjusted—changed a time or two until he thought it fitted.

"Drink, noble guest!" he said, and signed to a Syrian slave to fill the cups. "This night has gone to both our heads. We talk like madmen rather than two sons of Hellas. Samothrace is stepson to Eleusis—drink! I pledge you brotherhood. May wise Athene's owls bear midnight wisdom to you. Drink!"

But Tros set down the silver cup untasted. Though he doubted that his host would poison him, he knew the Syrian slaves' infernal skill and read the greed in Zeuxis' eyes.

"Pallas Athene, judge then! I will drink with you again, friend Zeuxis, when I have accomplished my purpose. Though the goddess deserted Hellas, may her wisdom govern us! And now your drooping eyelids welcome sleep, so I will act the good guest and not stand in Morpheus' way. Sleep soundly, and may all Olympus bless you for your hospitality."

He took his leave magnificently, as if Zeuxis were a king, bestowing largess on the servants and avoiding any conversation that could give the Greek a hint of his intentions. He refused the offer of a guide; such a man would merely be a spy for Zeuxis. He laughed as he strode toward Rome at the head of his men, for a slave went by on horseback, full pelt; and although he did not recognize the man, he was as sure as that the moon was rising on his right hand, that the Greek had sent a messenger to Pompey, or else Nepos, which amounted to the same thing. Pompey would learn of the pearls before dawn or, if not Pompey, one of Pompey's personal lieutenants, which might be even more dangerous.

He had one advantage. Wind and sea observe no hour-glass; he who has stood watch, and reefed, and gone aloft in midnight gales has lost the greater part of that inertia that dulls the wits of superstitious men in darkness. Tros could take advantage of the night and steal a march on treachery; and he thought he could count on his men to obey him though the shadows seemed to hint at unseen horror—though the Via Appia was lined with tombs and gloomy cypresses all haunted by the specters of the dead, and wind sighed through the trees like ghost-worlds whispering.

"I am afraid," said Orwic, striding beside Tros. "We Britons have an extra sense that warns us of things we can't see. My grandmother had the gift remarkably, and I inherit it. I wish I had a sword. This dagger isn't much use."

"Play the prince!" Tros answered gruffly. "Any fool can be afraid at night."

Himself, he had only one dread, one pertinent regret. He feared for Conops, who could hide himself in Ostia and watch for the arrival of the ship without the least risk of detection, if only Zeuxis had not known about it. He gritted his teeth as he condemned himself for not having sent Conops straight to Ostia before he ever entered Zeuxis' house. More to encourage himself than for Orwic's benefit, he broke out in explosive sentences:

"A man can't think of everything. The gods must do their part. We should be gods, not men, if we could foresee all. It would be impudence to take the full responsibility for what will happen. Are the gods dead—dumb—ignorant? And shall a god not recognize emergency?"

"Suppose we pray," suggested Orwic.

"Like a lot of lousy beggars. Rot me any gods who listen to such whining! Shall the gods descend and smirch themselves amid our swinery, or shall we rise and breathe their wisdom?"

Orwic shuddered. Celt-like, it disturbed him to assume familiarity with unseen agencies. Drunk or sober, he could swear with any lover of swift action, taking half the names of Britain's gods in vain, but when it came to thinking of the gods as powers to be reckoned with he thrilled with reverence. He could, and he invariably did, scorn druids in the abstract. In the presence of a druid he was insolent to hide his feelings. And when—as Tros invariably did—he felt himself within the orbit of the gods he was more fearful of them than encouraged—whereas Tros regarded gods as friends, who laughed at men's absurdities, despised their cowardice and took delight only in bravery, honesty, willingness, zeal.

"I think I hear the gods," said Orwic; for the trees were whispering. An owl swooped by on noiseless wings. The shadows moved in moonlight. "What if the gods are warning us to turn back? What can thirty of us do in Rome to hinder Cæsar? We have been having bad luck since the boat upset us in Tarentum Harbor. We were robbed in the inns on the road, and we were cheated by stage-contractors—eaten by the bedbugs—sickened by the bad food and the worse wine. Then Zeuxis' house, and treachery if ever I sensed it with every nerve of my skin! Cato—and what good did that do? He simply arrested that woman, which will turn her into our malignant enemy! Now we march into Rome without weapons, to see Pompey, who—"

Tros silenced him with an oath.

"Take all my men then! Go to Ostia! Wait there! I will do better alone, without such croaking in my ears!"

"No," Orwic answered. "By the blood of Lud of Lunden, I will not desert you. You are a man, Tros. I would rather die with you than run away and live. But I am not confident, nevertheless. I think this is a desperate affair."

"It is the gods' affair," Tros answered. "Nothing that the gods approve is desperate."

The Northmen, meanwhile, swung along the road with the determined step of well-fed venturers whose faith was in their leader. Two circumstances gave them confidence—that Tros was wearing his embroidered cloak implied that he anticipated welcome from important personages; and that they had left their weapons in Zeuxis' barn convinced them trouble was unlikely. They were thrilled by the thought of exploring Rome—the fabulous city of which they had heard tales by the winter firelight in their northern homes; and they began to sing a marching song, the Britons taking courage of example, humming the tune with them. And when men sing on the march their leader grows aware of spiritual thrills not easy to explain, but comforting. That singing did more to restore Orwic's nerve than all Tros's argument, and Tros grew silent because pride in his men smothered lesser emotions.

By the great stone gate, the Porta Capena, the guards of the *municipium* stared sleepily, but they were no more than police. The city was defended on her frontiers—far-flung. Mistress of all Italy and half the world, Rome recognized no need to shut her gates; they stood wide, rusting on their hinges like the Gates of Janus at the Forum that were never closed unless the whole Republic was at peace, as had happened in no man's memory. Tros led in through the gate unchallenged and at that hour of the night there were no parties of young gallants and their gladiators to dispute the right of way. Rare guards, patrolling two by two, raised lanterns as they passed, by way of a salute. More rarely, a belated pair of citizens, escorting each other homeward from a rich man's table, hurried down a side-street to avoid them. Now and then a voice cried from a roof or from an upper window in praise of Pompey; coming in the wake of the ovation Pompey had received, Tros benefited by it; men supposed he was bringing in the rearguard of Pompey's followers. Notoriously Pompey never entered Rome with any show of military power; it was like him to divide his following and bring the last lot in at midnight. There were even some who caught sight of the gold embroidery on Tros's cloak as he passed a lantern flickering before a rich man's house and mistook him for Pompey himself; but, since it was to no man's profit to inquire too closely into Pompey's doings in the night, those flurries of excitement died as suddenly as they were born.

But in the Forum there were guards who dared not sleep, since they protected jewelers and money-changers and the officers of bankers who bought and sold drafts on the ends of the earth. Nine-tenths of Rome's own business was done by draft, men trading in each other's debts until the interwoven maze of liabilities became too complicated to unravel and the slave was lucky who could say who rightly owned him. Where the round shrine of the

Flame of Vesta stood—Rome's serenest building, in which the Vestal Virgins tended the undying fire and no unhallowed eye beheld the seven symbols hidden there, on which Rome's destiny depended—there were lictors and a lictor's guard.

Another lictor and his guard stood over by the Atrium, where the Vestals lived in splendid dignity; and yet another lictor stood watch by the Regia, headquarters of the one man in the world who had authority to choose and to appoint, and even to condemn to living burial, if they should break their vow of chastity, the six most sacred personages whom Rome the more revered the more her own unchastity increased.

By daylight, when the Forum roared under a roasting sun, there was no understanding Rome's invincibility. But in the night below the frowning shadow of great Jupiter's Etruscan fane that loomed over the Capitol, when only lanterns and the lonely guards disturbed the solitude, and moonlight shone on rows of statues of the men who had drenched Rome in blood, or had defended her against Epirus, against Carthage, against Spartacus—of men who had returned from laying Rome's heel on the necks of Hispania and Greece and Asia—of stern men who had made her laws and stalwarts who had broken them but never dreamed of Rome as less than their triumphant mother—understanding swept over a man, and even Tros stood still in admiration, hating while he wondered.

Orwic stood spellbound. The Northmen gazed and hardly breathed. Awe stirred imagination and they thought they saw the images of gods who governed Rome. To them the stillness was alive with awful entities.

A bell rang—one note, silver and serene, in harmony with moonlight and the marble. Silently, as if a grave gave up its dead, the shrouded figure of a woman came out of the Vestals' palace. Instantly, as if he stepped out of another world, a lictor took his place in front of her and led toward the shrine of Vesta. Slaves, more dignified and gentle looking than free women, followed. Every guard within the Forum precincts came to statuesque attention and Tros raised his right hand, bowing.

The procession passed and vanished into shadow in the porch of Vesta's shrine. Tros signaled to his men to form up; silently they lined the route between the palace and the shrine, ten paces back from it. Tros growled in Orwic's ear:

"I told you the gods guided us! I did not know the hour the Vestals changed the watch."

He stood alone in front of all his men, a fine, heroic figure with the leaner, lither looking Briton half a pace behind him. On his right, in line with Orwic, the grim, bearded giant who served as deputy lieutenant of the Northmen, in place of Sigurdsen who had to bring the ship to Ostia, stood breathing like a grampus.

Then again, the one note on the silver bell. The lictor strode out of the shadow and the same procession wended its way back toward the palace, only that the Vestal Virgin this time was an older woman, statelier, who walked more heavily. Folds of her pallium, ample and studiedly hung, the arrangement of pallium over her head to resemble a hood, the repose of her shoulders and rhythm of movement united to make her resemble an image of womanly dignity conjured to life. Not the lictor himself, with his consciousness of centuries-old symbolism, more than echoed her expression of sublime, accepted and unquestionable honor. She was majesty itself—aloof, alone, so higher than the law that she looked neither to the right nor left, lest some one in the law's toils should be able to claim recognition and be set free. None, even on the way to execution, could behold a Vestal Virgin's face and be denied his liberty.

As she approached, Tros bent his right knee, raising his right hand, his head bowed. Orwic, uninstructed, copied him. The Northmen and the Britons knelt like shadows thrown by moonlight on the paving-stones, as Tros's voice broke the silence.

"Virgo vestalis maxima!"

Lover of all pageantry, and scornful of all life that was not drama, he omitted no vibration from his voice that might add to the scene's solemnity. It rang with reverence, but was a challenge, none the less. No less obsequious, more dignity-conceding summons to attention ever reached a Vestal Virgin's ears! It was the voice of strength adjuring strength—of purpose that evoked authority!

The Vestal faced him, pausing, and the lictor seemed in doubt exactly what to do; he lowered his fasces, the edge of the ax toward Tros, who made a gesture, raising both hands upward and then, standing upright, spoke exactly seven syllables in a language neither Orwic, nor the lictor, nor the Vestal's servants understood. But the Vestal drew aside the pallium that half-concealed her face—not speaking—pale and as severe as chastity, her middle-aged patrician features hard as marble in the moon's rays.

"In the Name I may not utter, audience!"

She nodded, saying something to the lictor, and passed on. The lictor signed to Tros to follow at a decent distance and three women, hooded like the three Fates, arm-in-arm, lingered a little to make certain of the interval, their glances over-shoulder not suggesting any invitation to draw nearer. Tros signed to his men to follow. Not a sanctuary in the sense that criminals might find a refuge there, the portico before the Vestal's palace was a place where waiting, unarmed men were hardly likely to be challenged.

At the palace door he was kept waiting so interminably that his men grew restless. Orwic whispered that another night was wasted. But the lictor came at last through a painted, carved door opening on silent hinges. The lictor beckoned. Orwic followed Tros.

They stepped on marble into a dim magnificence. An atrium adorned with columns and the statues of dead Vestals faded into gloom, so that the walls were hardly seen. Gold glinted on the cornices. There was a glimpse of marble stairs. Dark tapestries receded into shadow. There were two chairs, ebony and ivory, beneath a canopy between two pillars; and a rug was spread before the chairs that Pompey looted from the bed-chamber of Mithridates' queen—a thing of gorgeous silences, in which the feet sank deep.

The lictor turned his back toward the door, his fasces raised. A bell, whose note was like the drip of water in a silver basin, rang once and a curtain moved. In dim light from the lanterns near the canopy two Vestals—she to whom Tros had spoken and another, twenty years her junior—each followed by her women, entered and the women rearranged the folds of their white pallia as they were seated.

"You may approach now," said the lictor.

The chief Vestal murmured, hardly opening her lips. Slave-women moved into shadow. The surrounding gloom became alive with eyes and figures almost motionless but it was possible to speak low-voiced and be unheard by any but the Vestals. Tros and Orwic marched up to the carpet, bowed with their right hands raised, and stood erect, waiting until the chief of the Vestals spoke.

"Your name?" she asked.

Her tone implied authority that none had challenged. Equally, no pride obscured her calm intelligence; she looked like one at peace within herself, because she understood and was assured of peace whatever happened. There was candor in her eyes that might turn cruel, but no weakness and not too much mercy. She was the patrician, consciously above the law and none the less steel-fettered by a higher law of duty.

"I am Tros of Samothrace."

"You have appealed in the unutterable Name. It is forbidden to seek favors for yourself in that Name. Nor am I initiated in the mysteries that you invoke, save in so far as I must recognize all branches of the Tree. For whom do you seek benevolence?"

Tros, taking Orwic's hand, presented him, the younger man not lacking dignity; his inborn aristocracy impelled him to behave as if the Vestal, of whose virtues he was ignorant, was no less than an empress. He conveyed the unmistakable suggestion that respect paid by himself was something that the very gods might envy—and the Vestal smiled.

"Orwic, a prince of Britain," Tros announced. "Regrettably he knows no Latin."

In his heart he laughed to think that Orwic knew no Latin. He could plead the Britons' cause more artfully than any Briton could, and run less risk of noosing his own neck.

"You seek benevolence for him? Is he accused of crime? Is he a fugitive from justice?"

The Vestal's voice was tinged with iron now. She held her power to set aside the law—no cheap thing, not a force to be invoked for ordinary reasons. Conscious of responsibility as well as privilege, doubtless, too, she understood the value of not interfering often; privileges, strengthened by their rare use, grow intolerable and are lopped off when they cease to be a nine days' wonder—which is something that the privileged too seldom bear in mind.

"Virgo vestalis maxima, we plead for Britain! Cæsar plans in-

vasion against people who have done no injury to Rome. The Roman law permits him to declare war and to make peace as he chooses, and the Roman senate is as powerless as I am to prevent him. We appeal to you, who are above the Roman law—"

"Cæsar is Pontifex Maximus!" the Vestal interrupted. "I will hear no calumnies."

But Tros knew that. He knew that Cæsar was the only man on earth who even nominally had authority to discipline the Vestals, and he guessed that was the key to Cæsar's plans. Though theoretically uncontaminated by political intrigue, the Vestals' influence was much the subtlest force in Rome; it easily might be the factor that should tip the scales in Cæsar's favor, more particularly since his influence depended on the plebes, whose favor he had always courted. Not even Marius, nor Sulla at the height of the proscriptions when the garden of his private villa was a torture-yard and headless corpses strewed the paths, had dared to refuse clemency to any one the Vestals indicated. It was not in the arena only that their thumbs turned upward could avert the very blood-lust of the crowd, though only there, when a man lay bleeding on the sand, was their interference open. It was never challenged, because not abused; they never interfered to save a sentenced criminal. The crowd, that enjoyed butchery ten times as much because it took place in the presence of the Vestals, had an extra thrill whenever the six Virgins autocratically spared a victim. As far-sighted as he was ambitious, Cæsar had chosen the office of Pontifex Maximus as his first step toward making himself master of the whole republic, and there had been many an apparent stroke of luck since then that might have been explained as something far more calculable if the Vestals had not been past-mistresses of silence. Tros's last thought would be to try to turn them against Cæsar.

"I have come to assist Cæsar," he said, swallowing. Resentment against destiny half-choked him. "*Virgo beatissima,* my father was a prince of Samothrace. He foretold, with his last breath, when his spirit stood between two worlds and he could see into the future and the past, that I, his son, should turn away from enmity of Cæsar and befriend him. This I do, not gladly, but with goodwill, since I know no other way of saving Britain, and a friendship may not be forgotten for the sake of enmity. The Britons are my friends. So I will yield my enmity and be of use to Cæsar, though three times to his face I have repudiated him."

The Vestal nodded. Though aloofness limits men and women in the field of action, it enlarges their ability to see deep into character.

"How shall you save Britain and be Cæsar's friend?" she asked.

"Virgo vestalis maxima, can Rome survive, if Cæsar fails?" Tros answered. "He will meet with resistance in the Isle of Britain that will tax his strength and give the Gauls encouragement to rise behind him. What then? Are the patricians strong enough, or well enough united to keep Rome from anarchy, if Cæsar meets disaster? Can Pompey hold the factions that would fly at one another's throats if Cæsar's standards fell?"

"What if Cæsar should prevail in Britain?" asked the Vestal.

"Virgo beatissima, if all Rome's legions should invade that wooded isle, in five years they could not boast they had conquered it! There is a race of men who have defeated Cæsar once. There is a king who will oppose him while the last man breathes."

"Yet Mithridates fell. Is Gaul free?"

"Wait yet for the news of Crassus!" Tros retorted. "Roman arms are not invincible. Let only Crassus meet defeat, and Cæsar fail to conquer Britain—who then shall preserve Rome from the people's tribunes and the mobs? Pompey? The patrician who holds his nose because the rabble's stench offends him? Pompey, who has twice let pass an opportunity to seize the reins? Pompey, who refuses the dictatorship because he knows his popularity would melt like butter in the sun? Pompey, whom the tribunes hate because he lords it over them, and keeps postponing the elections to upset their plans? Will tribunes, and the mobs they lead, serve Pompey —or rebel? And if the people's tribunes should successfully rebel, how long then—"

The Vestal stopped him with a gesture, frowning. It was not compatible with dignity to lend ear to a stranger's views of what demagogues might do to Rome's most sacred institutions.

"For a stranger you are possessed by a strange interest for Rome," she said ironically.

"Rome is not my city, but I know her weakness and her strength," said Tros. "I would rather save Rome than see Britain ravished by the legions to whom Cæsar has been promising the plunder."

"Cæsar is not straw blown by the wind," she answered. "Nor is he a slave to be beckoned—"

Tros slipped a hand under his cloak.

"Nor a hireling to be bought," she added, sure she understood that gesture. "He is not like Cato, who prefers the lesser of two evils; Cæsar seizes on the greater evil as the keenest weapon. Nor does he resemble Cicero, whom gratitude or grudge can turn into a purblind hypocrite. Cæsar is not Antonius, whom the mob's praise renders drunk. Nor is he a fool like Sulla, using power for revenge; he makes friends of his enemies if they will yield to him. There is no man in the world like Cæsar. Who shall tame his pride?"

"But one may foster it," said Tros, and put his hand under his cloak again. When he drew it forth there rested on his palm a heavy leather bag, not large but tightly filled and tied around the neck with gold wire.

"Why," he asked, "does Cæsar say he goes to Britain? What bid has he made to justify himself?"

The Vestal almost smiled.

"He has told all Rome that he will bring back pearls," she answered, "for a breastplate for the Venus Genetrix."

"These pearls," said Tros, "are plenty for that purpose—I am told they are superior to those that Pompey brought from Asia and put on exhibition in a temple, but did not give. They were entrusted to me by those who ponder over Britain's destiny. I am to use them as I see fit, in the cause of Britain. *Virgo beatissima,* I crave leave to deposit them in your charge, as a trust, for Cæsar's use, to be employed by him to make the breastplate for the goddess, to be known as his gift, if—and only if—he turns back from invading Britain!"

Not one moment did the Vestal hesitate.

"You ask what I may not refuse," she answered. "Whosoever obtains audience may leave whatever sacred things he pleases in my charge. But had I known what you intended you would not have been received! I am not Cæsar's monitor; nor have I any means of reaching him. If it were known in Rome that—"

She glanced sharply at the younger Vestal—then at the lictor over by the door—then swiftly into the shadows where her women stood, all eyes—but they were out of earshot.

"Were it known that I send messengers to Cæsar," she said, lowering her voice, "all Rome would say the Vestal Virgins are no longer higher than intrigue. And Cæsar's ways are too well known. No woman corresponds with Cæsar and remains above suspicion."

"Virgo beatissima, send me!" said Tros. "I have a ship—my own swift, splendid ship, well manned. By the unutterable Name, I swear that rather than betray you to the Romans I will taste death sooner than my destiny intends, and every man of mine shall taste it with me! I fulfil a friendship, than which no more godlike course is open to a man in this life. And I hold that he who trims his sails to catch the gods' wind, wrecks his soul if he breaks faith! If you think Cæsar can save Rome from anarchy, send me to save him from invading Britain, where he will only squander strength and wreak a havoc, while Rome dies, mad and masterless!"

"I can not protect you. I can not acknowledge you—except to Cæsar," said the Vestal.

"Let the gods protect me! Let the gods acknowledge me!" Tros answered. "If I will do my duty they will do theirs."

For a while the Vestal pondered that, chin resting on her hand, her elbow on the chair-arm.

"Cæsar's pride will be well satisfied," she said at last. "If he could make believe he had brought pearls from Britain for the Venus Genetrix—he might assert they are a tribute from the Britons—that would glut his craving for renown, at least a little while. He is a madman with a god's ability, a man's lust to appear generous, and a fool's ignorance of where to stop and when to turn. He might have been a god. He is a devil. But he can save Rome, being ruthless, and because, although he panders to the mob, he will deceive them, saving Rome's heart, seeming to supplant her head. Rome may live because of Cæsar and in spite of him."

"I am not Rome's advocate, but I will serve Rome for the sake of Britain," Tros exclaimed. He held the bag of pearls out in his right hand, kneeling. *"Virgo beatissima,* so send me now to Cæsar with your word."

The Vestal took the bag of pearls into her lap and Tros stood up. Not even in a climax of emotion did it suit his nature to stay long on bent knee. Even reverence had limits.

The Vestal beckoned and a woman came; she whispered and the woman brought a golden bowl, engraved with figures of the Muses, that had once adorned a temple before Sulla raped the shrines of Hellas. When the woman had retired into the shadows she undid the golden thread and poured the pearls into the bowl, the other Vestal leaning to admire them, not exclaiming and not opening her lips—but her nostrils and her throat moved suddenly as if she caught her breath. Tros had not enlarged beyond the bounds of truth. Not even Rome that plundered Ephesus had seen such treasure in one heap. Those pearls, under the lamp light, were like tears shed by a conquered people's gods.

"Draw nearer," said the Vestal, and again Tros knelt, that she might whisper in his ear. She said one word, then laid her finger on his lips.

"That word," she said, "will be sufficient proof to Cæsar that you come from me. He will believe your lips. But if you use it falsely, then I know of no death and of no curse that were not bliss as compared to what your destiny will hold! There are degrees of shame below the reach of thought. And there are depths of misery where worms that crawl in corruption appear godlike in comparison to him who dies so deep! Not Tantalus, who told the secrets of the gods, knows suffering so dreadful, as shall he who violates that confidence!"

"I keep faith, not from fear," Tros answered, rising stubbornly. "What word shall I take to Cæsar?"

"Bid him look toward Rome! Bid him waste no energy, but keep his hands on Gaul, that when the hour strikes he may leave Gaul tranquil at his back."

Tros bowed. Her attitude appeared to signify the interview was over, but he had a task yet—and he needed for it greater daring than he had yet summoned from the storehouse of his faith in the invincibility of promises performed. He had assured Helene he would do her no harm if she trusted him; his own interpretation of that promise was a thousand times more generous than any she was likely to assume. Mistaken he had been in letting Zeuxis guide him to her house, and he had made a worse mistake confiding in her; but none of that was her fault. He would set right the results of that—and yet if he proposed to save her from the prætor's torturers he must summon enough brazen impudence to plead, before a woman whose authority depended on her chastity, for mercy for an alien whose insolent contempt of chastity was typical of what was steadily destroying Rome!

He made abrupt, curt work of it:

"If Cæsar is to save Rome, let him use all agencies," he said. "There is a woman in the clutches of the prætor's men, whom Cæsar had employed to ferret information. Helene, the daughter of Theseus of Alexandria—"

"That immodest rake—!"

"Is Cæsar an immaculate?"

"Cæsar is Pontifex Maximus. For Rome, and for the sake of institutions older than the city, I let myself see only Cæsar's virtue. For that woman I will not offend against the public decency by turning up my thumb!"

"Virgo beatissima, let Pompey carry that blame!" Tros retorted. "He has violated modesty so often that one more offense will hardly spoil his record! I am told he comes—"

"At dawn," she said, "to offer sacrifices for his wife's recovery."

"Virgo vestalis maxima, one word from you will be enough. If Cæsar's daughter—Pompey's wife—dies, who then shall keep Pompey from defying Cæsar? Will the mob not rend Rome unless Cæsar can prevail over the patrician factions, into whose hands Pompey will deliver Rome's fate? And shall Cæsar be allowed to fail because, forsooth, unquestioned chastity was timid and too careful of itself to whisper in behalf of Cæsar's spy?"

"You overstep your privilege," the Vestal answered frowning. "I will mention her to Pompey. I will keep these pearls in trust, for Cæsar's gift to Venus Genetrix, provided he draws back from Britain. But remember—I can not protect you or acknowledge you. Farewell."

She rose, inclining her head slightly in reply to Tros's salute, her dark eyes curiously scanning Orwic, whose expression suggested a schoolboy's when a lesson-period was over.

"This way!" said the lictor loudly. "This way! More to the right!"

Tros and Orwic backed, until the silent door shut slowly in their faces and they turned, expecting to be greeted by the Northmen.

They were gone! The portico was empty. Silence, silver moonlight and a Forum peopled only by the statues and the watchful guards, who leaned against the closed shop-windows.

Silently a lictor, followed by a file of four men in the Vestals' livery, emerged out of the shadows and stood guard before the Vestals' door.

"Move on!" he ordered arrogantly. "This is no place for loiterers!"

CHAPTER LXXXVIII

THE PRÆTOR'S DUNGEON

I have seen more lands than many men have heard of, and more dungeons than most men believe there are. Ever I visit dungeons, because their keepers are seldom as cruel as their masters who commit the victims to living death in the name of justice. Many a man, for a coin or two to ease a jailor's avarice, has died on parchment. Many a corpse has pulled an oar on my ship—aye, and pulled well, no better, it may be, but at least no worse for freedom and work.

If I see a city's dungeons, thereafter that city's rulers are an open book. The worse the dungeon, the more surely the city's rulers are unfit to clean it; justice is for sale in that city, and its dungeons are a likeness of its rulers' hearts.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Tros's first impulse was to rush around corners and hunt for his men. Orwic's bewilderment brought out his reserves of level-headedness.

"If they are near, we shall soon know it," he said, shrugging off the tremor he felt creeping up his spine. "If they are far, then only wits, not feet, can find them."

He strode up to the nearest watchman, who lounged against a shop-front entertaining himself by plaiting a wrist-thong for the vicious looking bill-hook of a weapon that he carried. The free man, an Etruscan, merely grinned when questioned, spat, and called Tros "pretty Hercules"—then asked whether the gods had use for money on Olympus. Tros produced a coin. The Etruscan spun it in the air. As he caught it back-handed and spun it again he answered Tros's question by putting another:

"Will they seat you in among the *equites?* Or are you an ambassador? The senate sometimes entertains ambassadors in very good seats, but the compliment fools nobody. Ambassadors in Rome pay richly for whatever courtesy they get. Me? I am paid to guard this goldsmith's. Is there no more money in Olympus? Have our Roman armies stripped that treasury, too?"

Tros showed him another coin and let the moonlight glint on it. "Which way did my men go?" he asked. "Who took them?"

"How should I know they were *your* men? Who else should know it, either? I should say they were suspicious characters and that's what the prætor's man thought, evidently."

Fifty guards could not have arrested his Northmen without a clamor that would have wakened Rome. There had been trickery, not violence. He showed the coin again.

"The prætor's man may have thought there was a bribelet to pick up, but he could not make those wooden-headed fellows understand him. What were they doing, lurking in the Vestals' portico? He had a right to order them away. But it is forbidden to make noises there at night, so he tried arguing, instead of sending his runner to turn out the guard. But I daresay he would have had to turn out the guard all the same—for they were dumb fools—if a fellow who looked like a Greek hadn't turned up and told them to follow him. They went like goats after a piping boy. Ss-s-s-t! Haven't you forgotten something? Gold, eh? Hercules, I thank you! If I weren't afraid to lose my sinecure, employment being none too plentiful for free men nowadays, I might advise you to go hunting for your men not far from Pompey's school of gladiators. Things being as they are, I don't dare to give advice; the owner of this place I'm paid to watch is one of Pompey's clients. What breed of barbarian is that one?"

He pointed to Orwic, who stood like a statue, moon behind him, peering into gloom along the Via Sacra.

"I would give a month's pay to see you and him in the arena! You should wield a club, like Hercules, or take the *coestus*. He looks like a *retiarius*—as agile as a leopard—look at him! See how he supples his loins when he moves!"

"Would you know the Greek again who led my men away?" Tros asked him.

"Maybe. But I also know on which side of the street the sun shines. Even in the senate there is only Cato who tells all he knows. Perhaps he likes to have stones thrown at him! For myself, a little bread and wine and olives, with a ticket for the circus now and then, seems better than wagging the tongue and what comes of it. But I have seen that Greek in company with Zeuxis, who is one of the contractors who—but I am not a woman. My peculiarity is silence as to matters that are no concern of mine."

The news that Zeuxis had a hand in the betrayal of his men made Tros draw on instantly his full protective armor of dissimulation. He hid his consternation—swallowed it—suppressed it—grinned—put his wits to work. He knew the Greek mind. He could outplay Zeuxis!

It was no use going to him; direct means would be met with plausible obscurity—countered with guile. He must be indirect, and swift.

"You have relieved my mind, my friend," he said to the Etruscan. "Now I know where I can find my men, and that is worth another coin or two—here—pocket these. For a moment I feared my men had met such a fate as that woman Helene's, whom the prætor dragged out of her house! What happened to her? Was she thrown into the Tullianum?"

"Hardly!" The Etruscan laughed. "She is worth too much to be let rot in that hole. Not even Cato would do that with her. Cato is economical. That Tullianum is a pesthouse; there's a dark hole where they lower them and let them perish of disease or hunger. I have seen it; I was sent in with a message for Septimus Varro, who was the custodian until they caught him substituting corpses for the prisoners whose friends had money and were free with it. Varro was crucified; so money isn't everything, after all; but I never heard that the men who bribed him suffered. If you asked me, I should say that some of Cato's men will disobey him and take as good care of Helene as they think her fashionable friends will pay for. Cato might have her scourged—he's a stern men, Cato is—but that won't happen until to-morrow or the next day, when he tries her case in public. Meanwhile, she'll be lodged under the prætor's office; you can see the front wall of the cells from here, but where she'll be is 'round behind; they'd be afraid to keep her where her friends might rescue her."

"She'll be guarded closely."

"Not a doubt of it. But praetor's cells are not the Tullianum. Any one with money in his hand can see a prisoner on one excuse or other—that is, if the torturers aren't busy with them; now and then they torture some one all night long to save the magistrate's time next morning, but you can generally hear the outcry when they're doing that. You see, they can't take evidence from slaves unless they're tortured first, and any one who's not a Roman citizen is liable to have his testimony questioned with a hot iron. That's a good law; it makes citizenship valued—not that citizens aren't liars, but they've a right to be privileged over mere colonials and slaves and aliens. If everybody was allowed to tell lies in the law-courts how could justice be administered?"

Tros walked away, but the Etruscan went on talking to the night. Orwic stepped forth like a shadow from among the statues in the Forum and followed Tros, who led toward the prætor's office. There were no lictors on the portico, they being personal attendants on the magistrate; in place of them a guardian as grim as Cato, without Cato's dignity, yawned while he watched three underlings throw dice beside a lantern.

"Halt!" he ordered, as Tros started up the steps. "No visitors. The prætor will be here soon after sunrise."

"I have urgent business," said Tros.

"Who cares? Have you a permit? Jupiter! Am I to be disturbed all night long by the gallants who buzz for that woman Helene like flies after fruit? Get hence!"

But already Tros stood on the portico. The guards ceased throwing dice to stare at him and reached into the shadow for their weapons, but none showed any eagerness to be the first to try to throw him down the steps. Their chief, a fat man with a double chin and strange, old-fashioned keys hung from a big ring fastened to the girth on his big belly, puffed his cheeks out and exploded, tilting back his stool on one leg:

"Jupiter! What now? Did you hear me tell you to be gone? By sulphury Cocytus—"

"I have heard," Tros answered. "You have yet to hear. Come yonder and speak alone with me."

He strode along the portico and waited, leaving Orwic standing near the upper step. Inquisitive, astonished, curious—inclined to continue asserting his official consequence, but growing cautious now that he could see the gold embroidery on Tros's cloak—he with the two-fold chin said something to his men about observing Orwic and, arranging his own cloak over his great belly, shuffled toward Tros, his slippers rutching on the stone.

"It is no use, master. I have turned away two-score of gallants, though they offered me enough coin to have bought the next election! There are definite orders. The prætor has—"

Tros interrupted:

"Cackler! I have come from Pompey, who intends to set the woman free. Have you not heard that Pompey entered Rome?"

"By Venus, who did not hear? He and his men made noise enough! But what has that to do with me?"

"If you wish Pompey's favor you will let me in and let me speak to her."

"Nay, master! Nay, nay! It is all my place is worth! If Pompey wants to override the prætor's orders, let him come himself! I mean no disrespect for Pompey. Bacchus knows, I drank to him but two hours since. I wish him the dictatorship. But Gemini! What sort of guardian does he think I am, that he should send a stranger to me—and no writing—not a signet—nothing? Tell me your name. Who are you? Offer me a proof that you are Pompey's messenger."

Tros could invent a tale more suddenly than any Parthian could wing an arrow on its way. His amber eyes, glowing in moonlight, looked like pools of honesty; his bravery of bearing and his air of power in restraint aroused conviction. It was next thing to impossible to guess that he was lying. Even that familiar of courthouse perjury and criminal intrigue believed him.

"Pompey was in great haste," Tros said, speaking swiftly. "As an act of generosity to Cæsar, he intends to set that woman free because he knows she has been doing Cæsar's errands. He will make no scandal. Therefore, he will first see Cato in the morning. Meanwhile, he dreads that the woman, in fear, may reveal such information as she has, and to prevent that he has sent me to assure her she shall go free. There was neither time to write a permit, nor would that have been discreet; such messages are best conveyed by word of mouth. He told me, though, that I should find you are a man of excellent discretion who would have no scruples about doing him this favor when the matter is explained. I am to tell you, you may look to him for favorable notice."

"Did he tell you my name?" asked the keeper of the keys, a shadow of suspicion dimming credulity.

"No. Neither he, nor any of his friends remembered it. He called his secretary, but the secretary had forgotten, too. A nobleman like Pompey has so many interests, it would be strange if he could name you off-hand."

"He is likely to forget this service just as easily," the other grumbled.

"Aye, he might," said Tros. "Great men are not fastidious rememberers! But that is my responsibility; you may depend on me to keep you in his mind. Lead on; I have to make haste; I must report to Pompey before daylight."

Doubtfully shaking his keys—although he did not any longer doubt Tros's story—the man led the way into the prætor's office, down a dimly lighted stairway and along a passage stifling with dampness and the smell of dungeons.

"Look you!" he said, turning suddenly where a guttering candle threw distorted shadows on an ancient wall. "Is this a trick? We lost two prisoners a week ago through people passing poison in to them. They dread the torture and their friends dread revelations! You're not meaning to slip her a dagger? No phials—nothing of that sort? Cato would have me scourged if I should lose one as likely to tell other folks' secrets as she is. Well—you can't go in. You'll have to speak to her through the grating, and mind you, I'll watch. I want to see both your hands the whole time."

Tros clasped his hands behind him. The custodian led toward a heavy oaken door and hammered on it with his keys. The thump and jingle brought a dozen answers from the near-by cells, including one that cried out from the dark for water:

"I will tell all! Only give me a drink and I will tell all I know!"

"Time for that in the morning!" said the jailer. "Silence!"

He shook the keys again and slapped Helene's cell door with his flat palm.

"Mistress!" he whispered hoarsely, "wake up! Here's a visitor—and as you love your life, don't let a soul know I admitted him! Understand now—if you get me in trouble over this—"

"Who is it?"

Fingers appeared through the grating and a nose was pressed against it.

"Keep those hands down! You may talk to him, but if I see a thing passed in there'll be trouble! Now," he said, signing to Tros. "Be quick and keep your voice low. There are three-score ears, all listening."

Tros stepped up to the grating, keeping his hands clasped behind his back where the custodian could watch them in the candle-light.

"Water! Water! I'll be dead if you don't let me drink! I'm dying now!" a voice croaked from the darkness.

"Silence!" roared the jailer, "or I'll let you know what thirst is! Shall I fetch salt?"

That threat was enough. The passage ceiling ceased to echo to the cries. There fell the silence of a tomb, irregularly broken by the clank of fetters and the dripping of some water set where the man in agony of thirst could hear it.

"Who are you? I can't see you," said Helene's voice.

"Tros of Samothrace."

"You! You! I have friends who will—"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh! I received word that Cato had ordered you seized. I have worked to release you, and I know now I can manage it."

"How? Who?"

"Never mind. Cato is determined to have you scourged as an example, and the more your friends try to dissuade him the more determined he will be."

"By Isis! It is I who will prevent that! I have death-drops hidden. Even Romans don't flog corpses!"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh! There are greater ones in Rome than Cato. I have influence. By noon to-morrow you shall go free. But remember—you will owe your liberty to me and you will have to recompense me."

"How? They will have looted all my property! The rascal who owns my house will have put his bailiffs in already. They have chained my slaves. It will take me months to recover, even if I don't catch plague in this pest-hole! The worst is that Cæsar is sure to hear of it. He'll say I'm an incompetent and never trust me any more. I'm ruined!"

"No," said Tros, "but you might easily be ruined if you failed to keep in my good graces! I will make your peace with Cæsar, if you—"

"You? You are Cæsar's enemy!"

"Not I. Now listen. It is Pompey who will order your release, but he will do it proudly and against his will. Don't trust him, but pretend to trust him. When they let you out, go straight to the house of Zeuxis and pretend to Zeuxis that you don't know it was he who betrayed both of us."

"He? Zeuxis? What has he done?"

"Nothing that can not be undone. I will tell you when we meet at Zeuxis' house. He wants my pearls. He thought I had entrusted some of them to you—"

"The Greek dog!"

"Watch him! Aid me to make use of him and I will stand by you as long as you deserve my confidence."

The custodian rattled his keys.

"Make haste!" he urged. "There's no knowing when they'll bring in prisoners. It's all my place is worth to have you seen down here!"

"Are we agreed?" Tros asked, his face against the bars, for he was curious to see what clothing they had left her and whether she was locked into a less filthy dungeon than the others. Suddenly Helene pressed her lips between the bars and kissed him.

"Aye! Agreed!" she said, and laughed. "I am no imbecile, Tros of Samothrace! You need me, or you would never have stirred a finger to release me. You shall have me!"

"Come!" exclaimed the jailer. "Come now! You have been here long enough to tell the story of the fall of Troy!"

He took Tros by the arm and tugged at him. As Tros turned, scowling at the prospect of intrigue with any kind of woman, he could hear Helene's voice, half-mocking but vibrating with excitement, as she whispered:

"It was Tros who founded Troy! Argive Helen owes a recompense to Tros! I think his gods have set this table for a feast of the affections! Go and lay an offering on Venus' altar, with a gift from me beside it!"

CHAPTER LXXXIX

POMPEIUS MAGNUS

I am not of their number who deny the virtue or the greatness of a man because he lacks a touch or two of modesty and honesty. I make allowances for the poison of his flatterers, whose filthy lies would rot a man of iron. But what he has done is not my measure. What is he doing? What will he do? I have seen men so proud of their record that they view the future through a veil of vanity on which the past is painted. Their future discovers such men trying to relive the echoes of the deeds they once did.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Dawn found Tros and Orwic striding gloomily along the Via Sacra, turning and returning until they knew by heart the statues and the very cracks between the flagstones. Dust was stirred into their nostrils by the city slaves, who appeared in an army to sprinkle and sweep, their overseers watchful to pounce on coins or jewelry. One slave was flogged until he lay half stunned for trying to secrete a coin he picked out of a gutter.

Very shortly after dawn, demolishment resumed where Cæsar's agents had bought up the ancient buildings, and the usual cursing and thrashing attended the first speeding up of sleepy slaves, dog-weary from the day before. Draft animals were better treated, having cost more money; there was scarcity of horses, and the price of meat was higher than when Spartacus had raided the Campagna, but since Pompey drove the pirates from the seas there had been no interruption in the streams of slaves that found their way to market, so a slave of the laboring sort cost very little. It was reckoned economical to work a man to death and buy another in his place.

The hurried sweeping done, on temple porticos and at an altar in the middle of the Forum, shaven-headed priests went through a ritual of invocation. There appeared to be a competition between temples to see which could hurry fastest through the service, for the wind had risen and the clouds of dust made the increasing heat unbearable. Dust gritted in the teeth and filled the nostrils; it was underfoot again in gray drifts almost as soon as the sweeper gangs had vanished.

Shops were opened, and the yawning shop-assistants sunned themselves, greeting their neighbors and cursing the builders who obliged them to clean shop so constantly. There was a sudden roar of voices and a fire-brigade, all clad in leather and brass helmets, streamed across the Forum carrying their ladders, ropes, poles and leather buckets—hundreds of buckets all nested together, for use by any slave or citizen they could impress into the service. Their united shout was like a war-cry:

"Crassus! Crassus!"

In his absence Crassus' agents were neglecting no chance to make money for their master; they preserved Rome from the flames, but he was richer by each fire they extinguished, though they forced the passers-by to form the bucket gangs and drove the neighbors' slaves into the hottest smoke.

And Pompey not yet. It was two hours after dawn before he came, on a big bay horse, magnificent in golden armor, attended by a host of friends and followed by a roaring crowd that choked the Via Sacra, thundering his praises. There was no name too good; imperator was the mildest; half the crowd was calling him dictator, he occasionally making modest efforts to take the crowd at its word. He shook his head repeatedly.

No armed men followed him. There were a dozen men on horseback and at least three times as many walking, all wearing the deep blue-bordered toga of the *equites* and each man followed by his personal attendants. Pompey's own slaves were innumerable. It was their task to keep the crowd from swarming in on the procession, and their method varied from remonstrance to the use of heavy cudgels.

In among the horsemen behind Pompey was a litter borne by slaves and loaded heavily with gifts; between the folds of linen that protected them from dust the glint of gold shone now and then; it was not Pompey's way to ask a favor of the gods without enriching their establishments with plunder from the fanes of other gods less fortunate.

The crowd swarmed in among the statues, yelling, and a company of Pompey's slaves ran in among them, handing out free tickets for the races and the ensuing combats between gladiators in the Circus Maximus. Speculators bought up the tickets promptly. Tros and Orwic each received a ticket as they worked their way into the crowd toward the semicircle formed by Pompey's friends and attendants facing the shrine of Vesta. It was only by dint of struggling that they came within two paces of a horse's heels.

Pompey, in the middle of the semicircle, swung down from his horse and strode with all a Roman's dignity toward the entrance of the shrine, his white cloak that he wore against the dust revealing as it fluttered in the wind flashes of his golden corselet. The slave-borne litter followed him. In the porch before the shrine the slaves knelt, waiting until the Vestals' women came, white robed and wearing rosaries, to bear the gifts within. At each gift that they took up from the litter all the women bowed to Pompey, he saluting with his right hand raised. He was a splendid figure. He stood like a god in armor—which was two-thirds of the secret of his influence; the mob roared satisfaction at the very way he walked.

When the gifts were gone he strode into the shrine alone, as if he were the sun-god come to visit the undying fire. As imperator, triumvir and priest, his eyes were hallowed and his person sacrosanct. He never doubted it. No shrine was closed to him—although the very Roman brothels gasped when it was known that in Jerusalem he had invaded the Jews' inner shrine to look, as it was said, into the face of Jahveh. Pompey, but not many Romans other than the ritually ordained priests—and they but seldom, at appointed times—might see the sacred fire and the historic image of archaic Pallas, brought by Æneas from burning Troy; but there was skepticism on the faces of his friends, and there were dry jests on their lips. Tros heard some conversation:

"Gemini! If Julia dies in spite of all this, he'll regret those costly gifts!"

"What odds? The Vestals will find some suitable explanation. Even Vestal Virgins die, you know."

A shrew-faced man, between the two who had just spoken, laughed.

"The point is, Pompey has paid handsomely for something. Wait and see. If he should win the Vestals' influence—"

"Phagh! All he can expect from them is 'thumbs up' if his fancy gladiator gets the worst of it. The Vestals serve their pontifex. I told him only last week, he must find some way of weakening the Vestals if he hopes to outbid Cæsar for the mob's vote. Bury one of them alive at the Porta Collina—you can prove a case against any one by torturing a dozen slaves—and—"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh!"

"What frightens you? Convict one of unchastity, and for a year to come the sweet unsensuous crowd would talk about abolishing religion! That would cost Cæsar his grip on the plebes. It's the plebes who—"

"Who would have you crucified if they could hear you talking! Have you placed your bets yet on the races? Which team do you favor?"

"I don't know yet. I usually bet on white, but I have heard Helene the Alexandrian has a team of Cappadocians that she will enter, and they say she has adopted red—the gods know why! You'd think a woman of her laxity would choose the virgin's color! I have heard, too, that she wished to drive the four-horse team but was forbidden. If I knew who is to take her place I might bet on those Cappadocians—I've seen them—gorgeous beasts! And besides, I consulted the auguries—"

"Hah! And were informed, no doubt, that red might win unless the white should have the best of it! Who wouldn't be an augur! They make money either way—no need to bet! I'll wager you weren't warned that the prætor's men would seize Helene yesterday! There's a rumor that Cato means to have her scourged and driven out of Rome."

"Jupiter omnipotens! Is Cato crazy?"

"Probably. He'll do it, if he's sure it would annoy some political enemy. He likes to be pelted with stones and vegetables. It makes him feel honest. And he thinks nobody will dare to kill him."

"He'll discover his mistake if he scourges Helene! If he threw her to the beasts the mob might stand for it, because they'd have the spectacle. But scourge her? I think not. If he did that, whoever killed Cato could be sure of the mob's verdict."

"It wouldn't surprise me to know that Cato would enjoy death if it came to him in that way! The man isn't in his right mind. Did you hear how he gave his wife to young Hortensius? They say Alilia, his new wife, can't endure him; he goes bare-footed through the streets and thinks she ought to do the same! I've heard— Venus! Look at Pompey's face! Has he been trying to seduce a Vestal? Somebody has slapped him!"

Pompey was looking indignant. He was flushed. He tried to hide embarrassment by adjusting his cloak as he strode from the shrine, but he only succeeded in looking too proud to share his annoyance with any one else. His very gesture, as he drew the cloak around him, was a service of warning to friends not to question him. His lips were shut tight.

Tros tugged the nearest Roman's cloak.

"I have urgent business with Pompey. He expects me. Make way."

"Jupiter, what insolence! Stand back!"

"If I should have to shout to him," said Tros, "you might regret it. I am Tros of Samothrace."

"Oh. He who stopped him at the bridge last night? Save yourself trouble then. Pompey has changed his mind; your news, whatever it is, has ceased to interest him. Stand back!"

It was no use courting dagger-blades, and from the rear the crowd was roaring a new tumult, drowning speech. Though Tros had shouted at the limit of his lungs there was no chance that Pompey's ears would pick out one voice from the din. The crowd had swarmed up on the statues. There were men on the backs of other men—all yelling, and the pressure from the rear to catch sight of Pompey as he mounted his horse was prodigious. Dust was mixed with the sweat on men's faces. Tros could hardly breathe.

However, Orwic was beside him, smiling, masking his emotions.

"Stiffen yourself! Seize my foot!"

Tros sprang on Orwic's shoulders, balancing himself by setting one foot on a man's head, sparing his victim a swift smile that excused the liberty. Then Pompey could not help but see him; he was gorgeous in his cloak—a black-haired, handsome figure, like a gold-embroidered god, miraculously raised above a sea of faces.

Pompey hesitated. Tros—salt-sea-taught to use his helm between the waves—made up his mind for him. He sprang, as if thrown by the roars of the mob, and came down like a wedge between two of the horses that blocked the way. They reared and shied away from him and through the opened gap between their shoulders, quicker than a horseman could have drawn a dagger, Tros strode up to where the slaves held Pompey's horse. Still Pompey hesitated, frowning.

So they met on level flagstones, eye to eye. Pompey lacked the great advantage of the night before, when he could talk down proudly from his horse and Tros must look up like a poor petitioner. True, if Pompey had made but a sign, there would have been a dozen daggers buried in Tros's back before he could have turned; but Pompey was a lot too proud to trifle with that sort of cowardice; he threw his hand up to restrain his men and faced Tros with a curling lip.

"Mercury! You reach your goal!" he said, eyeing him steadily. Then he lowered his voice, so that not even the slaves who held his horse could overhear. "So you are Cæsar's man! You come here plotting against Cæsar—and yet serve him? I have heard you bearded Cato. Cato himself said it! Fool! The very whispers of the senate reach my ears! And now what? I am told that I must not harm Tros of Samothrace! I come to read the embers for an augury —my wife is ill—I seek foreknowledge of her destiny—and I am told I must give no offense to Tros of Samothrace! Have you the ear, then, of the Vestals? Are you Cæsar's spy?"

Tros answered without betraying that he recognized the danger he was in:

"Pompeius Magnus, if the Vestals so admonished you regarding me, shall I believe they were the first to speak of me? Or did a spy report my movements? Did the man who stole my men say how it happened they stood leaderless? Then you—deliberating whether it were safe to throw my men into the arena—wondering what influence I might have—doubting your spy's word, possibly—inquired about me of the Vestals. Is it not so?"

"Meddler! What do you in Rome?" demanded Pompey.

"Triumvir, I turn my back on Rome the instant you return my men to me!"

"It seems to me that Tros of Samothrace may harm himself," said Pompey. "Men armed with daggers in Rome in the night are not immune from interference because Tros of Samothrace pretends he owns them! Are they citizens? Are *you* a citizen? Are you a peregrine? Are you a citizen of any state allied to Rome or even recognized by the senate and the Roman people? Have you any rights in Rome whatever—of person or property? And, if those men are truly yours, may you possess them under the Roman law? If not yours, are they free—and if so by what right? If they are not free, then who is their master?"

It appeared to Tros that the triumvir was lashing himself into a rage deliberately—possibly to justify a course of conduct not in keeping with his dignity, whatever law might have to say about it. Pompey's eyes—full, lustrous and intelligent—eyes normally suggesting rather tolerant autocracy, betrayed unsteadiness. He was expecting something—bullying and threatening in hope of forcing information without actually asking for it.

"It appears to me," he said, "that Cato has arrested the wrong malefactor. He should set Helene free and question your activities!"

Tros held his tongue.

"It was not of your men you wished to speak when you accosted me at the bridge last night," said Pompey.

There was still that look of speculation in his eyes—almost of irresolution. He seemed to be giving Tros an opportunity to volunteer some information that he needed. Pompey, potential autocrat of two-thirds of the world, had far too many sources of information to make it safe to trifle with him—too many irons in the fire for any visitor in Rome to touch the right one at a guess without more luck than any reasonable man could look for.

"You have sent a man to Ostia," said Pompey suddenly. "How did you enter Italy? By land or sea?" Then, as Tros still held his tongue, "I am told you landed at Tarentum. Your ship will come to Ostia?"

That prodded Tros on his Achilles' heel! That ship was to her master and designer as a woman is to most men. Tros lied desperately—instantly.

"That ship is Cæsar's! I have authority from Cæsar to use all Roman ports."

He drew out from his cloak the parchment Cæsar had been forced to sign in Gades—unrolled it—flourished it—thrust it under Pompey's eyes, pointing to the seal—the beautifully modelled figure of Cæsar, naked, in the guise of Hermes. Pompey did not even glance at what was written; the proud sullenness of his eyes increased.

"Cæsar's protection? You had nothing you wished to say? No message?"

"I demand my men."

"Let Cæsar attend to it!" said Pompey. "Let me see that parchment."

He held out his hand but Tros thrust the parchment back under his cloak. There was nothing on it stating that the ship was Cæsar's; to the contrary, it definitely named Tros as the owner, merely authorizing him to enter and to clear from Roman ports for purposes of commerce. There were doubtless flaws in it that any legal mind could drive a wedge through instantly; it was even doubtful whether Pompey would need lawyers; since the war against the pirates his authority with shipping had been almost absolute.

Tros's back was cold; he sensed a climax now with the same nerves that always warned him of a coming storm at sea. But Pompey was an expert at deferring climax:

"That is all then," he said, turning to his horse, and at his gesture three intimates strode from the ranks. They pretended to help him to mount, but insolently shouldered Tros out of the way, turning their backs to him. Two horsemen beckoned, making a narrow gap in the ranks, sneering as Tros went by. The very crowd, still yelling Pompey's praises, knew he had been rebuffed; a thousand eyes had seen him flourishing the parchment. It was usual to try to thrust petitions into great men's hands, and though such documents were usually tossed to secretaries who ignored them, it was customary to accept them formally unless the individual petitioned wished to snub the applicant.

So the crowd mocked. When he made his way to Orwic's side and they began to force a way together through the throng some humorist made fun of the moustache that drooped on either side of

Orwic's mouth. Then Tros's gold forehead-band came in for comment. In another minute he was forced to doff his cloak and fold it to prevent its being torn off. Some men thought he was a Parthian, come craving relief from Crassus' legions; they yelled at him "Crassus! Crassus!" until those who could not see believed the fire-brigade was coming and divided down the midst.

So, down that rift, sweating and indignant, Tros and Orwic bolted into the comparative seclusion of the side-streets, where they turned at last into a fly-blown cook-shop and, discovering a table in an alcove at the rear, ate food concocted from the meat bought from temple priests—whose incomes were increased enormously by selling the fat carcasses donated by the pious for the satisfying of the gods.

"I wager we are eating Great Jove's heifer!" Tros remarked. "Be that an omen! Fragments from Olympus' table fortify us! If the gods of earth and sky are not asleep they— Orwic—has it ever dawned on your imagination that the gods ought to be grateful to us men for giving them an opportunity to use their virtue?"

"Nothing dawns on me at all," said Orwic. "It appears to me we have a lost cause. We are two lone men in Rome, and all Rome seems to be our enemy."

"No, for there are honest men in Rome," Tros answered. "I have made an enemy of Pompey. He is irritated because I went over his head to the Vestals. Arrogant aristocrat! He will hardly dare to disobey them openly, but neither will he swallow what he thinks is an indignity. A man in Pompey's shoes needs only to nod and there are fifty men at once to do whatever work he thinks too dirty for his own white hands. Indeed, I tell you, Orwic, a whole host of gods has reason to be grateful to us for an opportunity. Let them act godlike!"

CHAPTER XC

THE CARCERES AND NEPOS, THE LANISTA

Weigh well thy motives, trusting destiny to weigh thy deeds. I have heard this—it was Cæsar said it—that a captain should mother his men because he may need them later and they will die more bravely for

a captain who has showed them lovingkindness as well as strength. But I think otherwise. I say a captain who has not lovingkindness for his men is unfit to be died for. If he understand not that they need him, and be not ready to die with them, in an hour of worst need he shall learn that he knew not what leadership is.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

TROS's attitude was brave, but in his heart was nothing to support it. He was on the deepest bottom of despair. The need of keeping up appearances for Orwic's sake alone prevented him from giving way. He was a man who lived by energy; the exercise of will invoked new powers of imagination. But now that there seemed no concrete thing to do, his very will dried up.

Thrusting the unfinished food aside he rallied himself by summing up the facts, inviting Orwic to discover a solution. He slew flies with a spoon, arranging them in geometrical designs on the cook-shop table—one design for each fact, involutions indicating intricacy; then, thumbing off the gravy from his plate, he tried to work the calculus by smearing all the facts together into one plan.

"Zeuxis—who doesn't know yet that I know his treachery. That one's Zeuxis. He believes I'm carrying a thousand pearls under my cloak. Zeuxis, or else Nepos—very likely both of them—sent word to one of Pompey's agents that my men would make good gladiators. Probably the agent acted on his own responsibility, consulting Pompey afterwards—perfectly simple—sent one of Zeuxis' servants, whom they'd recognize, to tell my Northmen—in Gaulish, which they'd understand sufficiently to get his meaning—that I'd come out of the Vestals' palace through a back door, or by an underground passage or some such story. They supposed I'd sent for them—and walked straight into an ambush.

"Helene—presently at liberty and dangerous. There's Helene—that one. Has her eyes on me—anticipates a drama of affection, and the least she'll do will be to stir the jealousy of half-a-dozen dagger-digging sons of *equites!* Cæsar's spy. Probably knows enough to blackmail any one in Rome except Cato. Very likely she can help by an appeal to Cæsar's agents, of whom Memmius, a candidate for consul, is the foremost in the public eye. Call that one Memmius—a very doubtful quantity—a politician; anything that he does will be paid for through the nose by some one. All those other flies near

Memmius are politicians, each with his palm itching for a bribe—which each of them would pocket and forget!

"The senate. Those flies are the senate—not sitting—too hot for them, more ways than one, and the Forum too noisy, not counting the danger of riots. Villas in the country are more dignified. Only a small committee of the senate holding meetings behind locked doors in the temple of Castor and Pollux. There's the committee—probably inaccessible, but said to be plotting against Pompey, whom they hate nearly as much as they hate Cæsar and with equal cause.

"Cato—prætor and a member of the senatorial committee. If we *could* see the committee Cato would be there, and he's the only man in Rome who dares to challenge Pompey openly; but the rest of them hate Cato because he rebukes them for corruption. Cato intends to enforce the law as long as he's prætor and he'll be venomously angry because Pompey has compelled him to release Helene.

"I have made one mistake after another, Orwic! I believe two-thirds of Pompey's enmity this morning is accounted for by his having been told by the Vestals to procure Helene's liberty. He can't refuse. Their influence is much too artfully directed. They could turn all Rome against him. Probably he hates the thought of having to ask a favor of Cato, who will certainly hold out for terms. Cato can't be bribed, but he's a politician, always looking for the lesser evil; he would compromise, but like an undefeated swordsman.

"Pompey—he's that big fly—half out of his wits with worry. A good soldier and a rotten politician, drunk with renown—no doubt wishing he had not encouraged Crassus to go to Asia, since now he must stand alone against Cæsar. More than likely Pompey is encouraging Cæsar to invade Britain, hoping he may meet defeat. Pompey has a notion that by keeping my men he can force some information out of me, and if I could guess what he wants to know I might out-maneuver him; otherwise he will have them killed in the arena. He loathes the mob, and despises butchery, but he knows his influence is waning, so he will do almost anything for popularity. Spectacles—spectacles—doles of corn—anything; they say his agents scour the earth for wild beasts for the arena. Zeuxis undoubtedly told him of the pearls I brought from Britain. Pompey thinks too highly of himself to try to steal them, but he wouldn't hesitate to let Cato take them in the name of the Roman law. He very likely traded you and me to Cato for Helene! Now do you see what an error I made? Do you begin to understand the danger?

"Conops—nothing simpler than to catch Conops. Zeuxis has betrayed him. What then? My ship comes to Ostia and Sigurdsen drops anchor in the Tiber-mouth. Pompey has authority to order out as many triremes as he wishes; there are always two or three available. They'll either blockade Sigurdsen or force him to run if he's lucky. If they do blockade him, he will soon run short of food and water."

"Run for it!" said Orwic. "You must leave your men in Pompey's hands and hurry to Ostia."

"I will die first!" Tros answered, shaking the oaken table. "I expect my men to die for me. Shall I do less for them? Nay! What is duty for the man is obligation for the master! As the head rots, so the fish stinks! Orwic—"

Suddenly his amber eyes appeared to stare at an horizon. Parted lips showed set teeth and his fingers gripped the table edge.

"No cause is lost while there remains a weapon and a man to use it! I might go to Cicero. He corresponds with Cæsar. He has influence, and he is Cato's friend; but Cicero is in Pompeii, which is far off, and they say he is worried with debts and doubt. If Zeuxis told the truth—he often tells it when it costs him nothing—Cicero is planning to defend Rabirius for Cæsar's sake; if he will plead that rascal's cause before the judges he should not balk at protecting us!"

"Make haste then. Let us go to Cicero," said Orwic.

"No. He is a lawyer. I dread the law's delay. Nor will I cool my heels at the temple of Castor and Pollux until some senator comes out from the committee room to find out whether I will bribe him heavily enough to make it worth his while to promise what he never will perform! Nor do I dare to return to Cato; Pompey will have told him I am Cæsar's man, and I was with him only yesterday attempting to persuade him to turn on Cæsar! He will think Cæsar sent me to tempt him, meaning to denounce him if he fell into the trap—intriguing against Roman arms!

"No. Cato has probably undertaken to condemn my men to the arena, and will do the same for you and me if we attract his notice! That is just the sort of trick that Pompey would turn on the honest old fool—persuade him that my men are criminals, encourage him to have them butchered; then, supposing that the men are really Cæsar's, letting Cæsar know Cato is to blame for it, thus aggravating, he will think, the hatred Cæsar has for Cato. Do you see it? Pompey would get credit from the mob for showing eight-and-thirty victims of a new sort in the amphitheater. Cato would get the blame. And Cæsar, so Pompey would think, by trying to avenge the insult, would drive Cato to join Pompey's party. Quite a number of important people might follow Cato when the crisis comes. Rome's politics are like hot quicksilver."

"You appear to me to know too much," said Orwic. "In my own land I have found the politics bewildering, and they are simpler. How can you, who are not a Roman, pick the right thread and pursue it through the snarl?"

Tros paused.

"Men are born with certain qualities," he said, reëstimating Orwic—reappraising him; and there returned into his eyes that far-horizon look. "For instance, you were born with an ability to manage horses, which is something I could never do."

He mulled that over in his mind a minute. Then:

"Because I know ships and I understand the sea, it is a mean ship that will not sail faster under my hand than another's. Is it so with horses? Will a good horse, or a good team gallop for you faster than for me?"

"Undoubtedly," said Orwic. "What has that to do with it?"

"This—that I think the gods expect each of us to play his own part. There is a part that the Vestal Virgins play best, and there are other parts for you, and me, and for Helene—and even Zeuxis. It is not alone the great ones of the earth who— Let us leave this place! I saw a man who might be an informer hurry out and look too shrewdly at us as he passed the door."

He doffed his forehead-band and folded up his cloak, but even so he was too masterful a figure to escape the notice of the crowd. Men followed him and Orwic through the winding streets, accosting them in any fragment of a foreign tongue they knew. Thieves tried to rob them; half a dozen times Tros had to use his fist to save his cloak, until at last he struck one slippery Sicilian and sent him sprawling in the kennel. Instantly a cry went up that a barbarian had struck a Roman citizen! Three narrow lanes disgorged a swarm of loiterers whose life, endured in vermin-ridden tenements, was never raised out of its shabbiness except to see men slain splendidly in the arena. Rome's mob could rise as swiftly as the reeking dust, amuse itself a minute with a man's life, laugh, and disappear as casually as the knackers of the slaughter-yards returning home to dinner.

Orwic drew his dagger and the two stood back-to-back, Tros making no haste to display his weapon; through the corner of his mouth he growled:

"Don't stab unless you must! Stand firm, look gallant and expect some favor from the gods!"

Then:

"Citizens!" he roared, attempting to adopt the vulgar idiom that politicians used when cozening the crowd for votes. "One rattle of the dice yet! Hold!"

"Aye! Hold hard!" said a voice he recognized, and the Etruscan—he who was night-watchman for the goldsmith's in the Forum—elbowed his way forward, grinning. The whole crowd knew him; he appeared to have authority of some kind; they obeyed the motion of his hand and half a dozen men leaned back against the swarm behind them, vehemently resisting the efforts of others to get to the front.

"Porsenna! Let us hear Porsenna!"

The Etruscan smiled with the familiar, ingratiating, confident good humor of a popular comedian, long used to waiting for the crowd to quiet down before he loosed his jests. But when the yelling had died down enough for one voice to be audible, he wasted no time on amusing them. He threatened.

"It will be a good show in the Circus Maximus, but perhaps you would rather riot now than get free tickets; I am on my way to get the tickets. What will Pompey's secretary say, if I should have to tell him you have injured two of the best performers? How many tickets then for the people in my streets? Home with you!"

He gazed about him, memorizing faces, or pretending to, and if he had been a prætor he could hardly have received more prompt obedience. With jests, and here and there a grumble, they implored him to remember them and melted away up side-streets, not more than a dozen lingering in doorways to assuage their curiosity. Porsenna grinned at Tros.

"A good thing for you that the man who shares a bed with me is sick this morning! I had nowhere to sleep. And besides, it is true, this is the day I must distribute tickets. I get no pay for it, but people who want tickets have a way of keeping on the easy side of me, which makes life tolerable. We Etruscans love our bellies, and I assure you there isn't a house in all these streets where I can't get a good meal for the asking—that is to say, if they have anything, which isn't always. But there's always somewhere to turn for food or drink; I've noticed it never happens that they all starve on the same day. But have you found your men? No? Well, I'll find them for you. Only you must bear in mind I'm only a night-watchman and distributor of tickets, so you mustn't expect *me* to do more than show you where they are. I wouldn't have helped you just now if you hadn't given me a lot of money last night. You're a rich man and a stranger, and it always pays to go to a little trouble for folk who have generous tendencies. We Etruscans have a name for being sharp customers, but that's not true; we merely like the soft jobs and the good things and exert ourselves to get them. Let us come this way. Does it seem to you you owe me anything for that little service I did you just now?"

"Show me my men and I'll pay you handsomely," Tros answered.

The Etruscan led on through a maze of streets until they reached the valley below the Palatine, where an enormous wooden structure nearly filled the space between surrounding houses. The high walls were covered with electioneering notices in colored paint, and there was a constant pandemonium from cages, underground, where most of the wild animals were kept in darkness until needed for the public execution of Rome's criminals. There was a stench from an enormous heap of mixed manure that slaves were carrying away in baskets to be dumped outside the city, and the air was full of dust, besides, from heaps of rubbish being showered into carts.

There was a great gate at the end that faced the river Tiber, suitably adorned with horses' heads, weapons, shields and crudely fashioned lions, but the public entrances were all along both sides, and at the farther end were stables built of stone, beneath which were the cells in which most of the prisoners were kept who had been sentenced and awaited death in the arena. In the open space at the end there were spearmen, but not many and they did not seem to expect to be called upon for action, merely staring with indifference at Tros and Orwic as Porsenna led them toward a wooden office at the rear, where there was a small crowd of men, not one of whom seemed satisfied.

"They grumble, they grumble, they grumble!" Porsenna remarked. "But if there were enough tickets for every one in Rome, what profit would there be in being a distributor? Would anybody think it worth his while to curry favor with us? Some folk don't know an advantage when they see it. Watch them struggle for the allotments! Good sweat and excitement gone to waste! If there is one thing in all Rome that is honestly apportioned it's the circus tickets, region by region. There are so many for each important politician—so many for the giver of the games—and the rest are divided equally to us distributors. Now watch me."

He thrust two fingers in his mouth and whistled, then threw up his hand to catch the attention of a man at the office window. The man recognized him, nodded and tossed a bundle of tickets on to a shelf.

"There. That's the way to manage it. Now I can get mine when the crowding's over. All that costs me is two tickets; and since I'll know where they are I can do a favor to some one in one of my streets by telling him where he can buy them. Now come this way."

Farther to the rear, behind the stables, in between two rows of racing chariots that stood with poles up-ended, was a stone arch with a barred iron gate providing access to steps made of enormous blocks of stone that led down steeply into gloom. A fetid prison-smell came through the opening, and at a corner, where the steps turned, there was one lamp flickering. A spearman, with a great key at his waist, stood by the gate and sullenly ignored the pleas of half-a-dozen women, one of whom, on her knees, had torn her clothing and was beating her naked breasts.

He recognized Porsenna instantly and drove his spear-butt at the woman to get her out of the way.

"No!" he said. "No! Get away from here! If you want to see your husband, get a permit from the prætor's office. Otherwise, get sentenced, too, to the arena; then they'll let you die with him! You wish to visit the dungeons?" he asked, grinning at Porsenna. "You and two friends? I would let *you* pass in free."

Tros took the hint and dropped two coins into Porsenna's palm, who cleverly hid one and gave the other to the spearman. The gate opened on oiled hinges and a wave of filthy air came through the opening as Tros and Orwic followed the Etruscan down the steps.

And now noise blended with the smell. Infernal mutterings suggestive of the restlessness of disembodied phantoms filled the atmosphere; the sound, the Stygian gloom and the disgusting stench were all one. On a stone floor in the midst of the great square columns that supported a low roof three men played at dice by candle-light and half a dozen others watched them. All wore daggers; there were spears beside them, leaned against the wall; each man had as well a heavy iron club with a short hook and a sharp spike at the end. The dice intensely interested them; they scarcely looked up—snapping fingers and adjuring Venus to reward them for the sacrifices they intended to bestow on her.

The murmuring came through heavy wooden doors, in each of which there was a bronze grille at about the level of a man's face from the floor. All the doors were made fast by bars that fitted into sockets in the oaken posts. There appeared to be a perfect maze of cells, with narrow, almost pitch-dark corridors between them; and at the far end of the vault there was another set of stairs, of solid masonry, that evidently led to the arena or to some enclosure at one end of it. There was a charcoal brazier not far from where the men played dice and two clubs, similar to those the men had fastened to their wrists by thongs, were thrust into red-hot coal. A slave was blowing on it, and the red glow shone reflected in his face.

The slave spoke and one of the men removed a hot club from the fire, wrapping a wet cloth and then a leather guard around the handle. Two who had been watching the dice followed him. A fourth man lifted out a bar that locked a cell door, and the three went in, he who held the iron going last. The fourth man shut the door again, not locking it, and went back to the dice.

There was a great commotion in the cell—blows, oaths, scuffling, a screech—then one long yell of agony that seemed unending, as if the victim never drew a breath. The dice-players took no notice.

When the yell died to a sobbing groan the three came out again and one of them tossed the hot club to the slave who watched the charcoal brazier. The fourth man left the dice and went and set the bar in place. It was his voice that made Tros's blood run cold; he recognized it instantly. It was Nepos!

"Did you injure him?" asked Nepos.

"Not much. Just burned his fingers enough to teach him not to try any more digging. That's the third time he's tried to escape."

Nepos returned to watch the dice. The men resembled phantoms in the gloom; the candle-light broke up the shadows, distorting forms and faces, but the voice of Nepos was unmistakable.

"Who comes?" he asked, shading his eyes as he glanced at the three who were standing with backs to the entrance-steps, a puzzling light behind them.

"Porsenna—and two visitors," said the Etruscan.

"Visitors? Have they a permit? Who—what have they come for?"

"This nobleman has lost his men. I tell him he will find them here, though much good that will do him!"

"Who is he?"

Nepos approached. He appeared to be not the same man who had entertained Tros in his house. His ferocity, all on the surface now, had changed the very outline of his face—or so it seemed.

"Tros?" he said. "Tros of Samothrace? Who sent you here? That rascal Zeuxis?"

"I have come to find my men," Tros answered.

"Out! Get out of here!" said Nepos, flourishing his club at the Etruscan. Something in his tone of voice attracted the attention of the dice-players. They all came crowding behind Nepos.

"Well, I warned you I couldn't do more than show you where your men are," Porsenna remarked amiably. "You have heard him. He says I must go."

He turned toward the stairs. Tros, fingering his dagger, made as if to follow him but Nepos gestured to the others, who immediately cut off Tros's retreat and one man let Porsenna feel the point of his iron club as an inducement to go swiftly.

"You shall see your men," said Nepos. "Come."

He beckoned. If he was afraid of Tros he gave no sign of it although his keen eyes must have seen Tros's right hand at his dagger. Orwic drew his own short weapon and whispered to Tros excitedly:

"Don't follow him! Let's fight our way out!"

"No," said Tros, "let's find the Northmen."

He preferred to follow Nepos rather than be torn with iron hooks and clubbed. He took his hand off his dagger and touched Orwic's arm to reassure the younger man. Together they strode behind Nepos down a narrow corridor that stank of ordure and wet straw. There were cell doors right and left, and at the end, below a candle on a bracket, a peculiarly narrow opening protected by an iron grille—so narrow that if the grille were swung clear on its heavy hinges only one man at a time could possibly have passed.

"Do they know your voice?" asked Nepos over-shoulder, his voice rumbling along the tunnel.

"Sven! Jorgen! Skram! Olaf!" Tros shouted.

There was instant pandemonium. A deep-sea roar of voices burst out through the grille:

"Tros! Tros! Ho, master! Lord Tros! Come and rescue us!"

The prisoners in two score cells all added to the babel, clamoring for mercy; they supposed some great official had come looking for a lost retainer and on the spur of the moment every man invented reasons why he should be set free. Nepos struck his iron club against the grille and threatened to send for hot irons, but the Northmen did not understand him and their chorus roared louder than ever. An arm protruded through the grille and Nepos struck it, arousing a curse that sounded like a taut rope bursting suddenly.

"Silence!" Tros thundered, again and again, but not even his voice quieted them.

"Master, we sicken! We die, Lord Tros! Release us! Let us out!"

But it suddenly occurred to them that if he spoke they could not hear, and there was no sound then except their breathing as they crowded at the grille. Tros let his wrath loose:

"This is what I get for trusting you!" he growled in Gaulish. "Fine men! Follow the first lousy Greek who lies to you! Hopeless fools! Now I must buy you back like a job-lot of left-over slaves!"

He glanced at Nepos who was standing in between him and the grille.

"Whom should I speak to about freeing them?" he asked in Latin.

Nepos grinned sourly and turned a thumb down.

"They're due to die in the arena. If you like good advice, I'd say to you: leave Rome in a hurry!"

Tros held his breath. He thought of madness—of plunging his dagger into Nepos, loosing his Northmen and fighting the way out.

"It's too late to befriend them now," said Nepos. "This is the gate to the land of death."

Something in the tone of his voice reminded Tros that Nepos was a man of strangely mixed peculiarities and loyalties.

"What I have, won't help," he said. "I have this *tessera*." He drew up a broken disk of engraved ivory that hung on a cord around his neck, beneath his shirt. It was approximately half of an ancient ornament, irregularly broken off, its ragged edge inclosed in a thin casing of gold to preserve it. "My father exchanged *tesserae* with Zeuxis' father—"

"Eh?" exclaimed Nepos. "What? Here, let me have a look at that. Has that Greek tricked me into sacrilege? If he and you are *hospites*—"

He gestured with his arm along the passage and pushed Tros in front of him.

"Go back there where it is lighter. I must know the truth of this."

They returned to the echoing half-light where the slave still blew at the brazier, the men with iron clubs retreating backward and then standing near to protect Nepos. But that grizzled veteran seemed totally indifferent to danger. He kept muttering—

"*Jupiter hospitalis!*"

Tros slipped off the cord over his neck and gave the *tessera* into his hand. Nepos pulled off with his teeth the gold band that protected the jagged edge and held the piece of ivory toward the candlelight.

"That might be genuine," he muttered. Then, sharp eyes on Tros: "Do you swear to me that Zeuxis has the other half of this?"

"Not I," Tros answered. "I am from Samothrace and therefore take no oath at random. But I swear to you—"

"By *Jupiter hospitalis?*"

"Aye, by *Jupiter hospitalis,* that my father and Zeuxis' father exchanged *tesserae,* of which that is the one that I inherited."

"And has Zeuxis never given notice of repudiation?"

"Never. To the contrary, he welcomed me with such effusion that we never spoke of *tesserae* at all. There was no need. I arrived at his house without sending him warning and he welcomed me with open arms."

"The Greek dog!" muttered Nepos. "Are the Greeks not bound by oath of hospitality? Great Jupiter! In Sulla's time a thousand Romans risked proscription for the sake of that oath! I myself— But are you sure the Greek knew? You say your father and his father exchanged *tesserae,* but did Zeuxis know of it?"

"He did. Nine years ago in Alexandria he claimed my father's hospitality, on board my father's ship, when Ptolemy's men were after him for having said too much to the wrong listener. My father hid him in the hold between barrels of onions, and that was where I first met Zeuxis. It was I who took food to him, lest the crew should learn his whereabouts and drop a hint to Ptolemy's men."

Nepos began breathing through his nose, his windy gray eyes glinting in the candle-light. He stood with clenched fists on his hips considering, not Tros apparently, but the atrocity that had been done to his own person.

"Even if the Greek was ignorant, the oath was binding until publicly annulled," he muttered.

"Zeuxis is a Roman citizen," said Tros.

"Aye, that he is! These Greeks who become Romans need a lesson. They accept Rome's credit and deny her claims! They grow rich and they—this is too much, Tros—"

He shook his finger under Tros's nose, as if Tros had been a party to the sacrilege.

"You, too, are an alien and may not understand Rome's principles. I tell you, I have seen men sent to this place, to be torn by animals, for crimes that were glorious deeds compared to this atrocity! I would prefer to see a Vestal Virgin immured living! An offense against *hospitium!*—If Cato knew of it—"

"Send word to him," said Tros.

"No. That would do you no good. Cato is—what is it he calls himself?—not a philosopher—a logician—that's it, a logician. He would order Zeuxis crucified, but he would not let your men go. He would say, let each man die for his own offense."

"Offense?" said Tros. "I haven't heard of one. Who charged them? Who tried them? Who passed sentence"

Nepos stared at him, incredulous. He appeared to think Tros bereft of his senses.

"Your men," he said, "were caught red-handed lurking in the portal of the Vestals. They are not entitled to a hearing. An offense against the Vestals is beyond the law's arm, even as they are above it. They may not be mentioned in a court of law. No law can touch them. They may not be haled as witnesses. How then shall a magistrate try such a case? Besides, your barbarians are not Roman citizens, nor subjects of any kingdom that Rome recognizes—are they? Pompey himself ordered the lot of them into the arena! My friend, they're your men no longer. They must die."

Nepos began drumming on his teeth with horny fingernails.

Tros spoke:

"Then I die with them. They *are* my men."

Nepos blinked at him. "You would make a splendid spectacle," he said. "Do you fight well?"

"It remains to be seen," Tros answered. "But they will fight better with me than without me."

"Have you broken *tesserae* together?"

"Nay, we broke bread. We have built and sailed a ship together."

"You should have been born a Roman," said Nepos. "Once in a hundred years or so we breed a few of your sort. Well, I can do you the favor. You may die with your men if you see fit. You shall go in there with weapons. I can arrange that."

"You will earn my good-will, Nepos."

"Well, I like that better than your ill will. It will suit me; I shall get the credit for a fine spectacle. And who knows? If you have the Vestals' favor you may be safe in the arena. They may turn their thumbs up when the time comes. I can send you against Glaucus. He shall run you through the thigh. One can depend on Glaucus; many a time I have used him to preserve a man's life, but it never worked unless the Vestals had a hand in it."

He went on scratching at his chin. The wretches in the cells around him made noises like caged animals, all sounds uniting into one drab, melancholy moan. There was a conversation going on between cells in the polyglot thieves' jargon that creates itself wherever criminals are thrown together—droning, wholly without emphasis, resembling an echo of what happened last week. Its effect on Tros and Orwic was as if death clutched at them, but Nepos and his men seemed not to notice it—not even when a man in agony from their inflicted burns yelled imprecations.

"There is no place here to make you comfortable," Nepos said at last. "Are all oaths sacred to you?"

"Any of my making."

Nepos, scratching at his chin, nodded and nodded:

"Swear you will be here!"

"If my men are here, here I will be," Tros answered.

"And that barbarian?" He glanced at Orwic.

"He was the first against Cæsar's legions on the shore of Britain. Yes, I answer for him."

"Very well. Here, take your *tessera* and keep it. Trust me to deal with Zeuxis. There is no worse sin than violation of *hospitium*. You swear now—no trickery—you will be back here?"

"I agree," said Tros. "But what of my men? Can't you treat them better? They will sicken in that cage."

"Aye, they shall have good treatment. They shall be better fed. There is a shortage of strong barbarians to make a showing against the King of Numidia's black spearmen. They tell me your men fight with axes, which would immensely please the populace. As for Zeuxis—"

"If there's a law in Rome, my men shall go free yet!" Tros interrupted.

"Take my advice," said Nepos. "Let the law alone! If you apply to any magistrate he will inform himself as to Pompey's wishes and then condemn them legally on any trumped-up charge. As it is, they are not condemned. If the Vestals should bid them go free none could quarrel with it, could they? or with me either."

"Money," said Tros, "would buy Rome. Tell me whom to see about it."

"Nay, nay, why buy promises that no one could keep even if he dreamed of doing it! Whom would you buy—Pompeius Magnus? Rich—proud—I suppose he bears you private enmity, but that is not my business. Whom else? The Vestals? You can't buy them. You might petition them. You will have to do that secretly and very craftily. As for Zeuxis—if that scoundrel isn't crucified within the month for sacrilege against *Jupiter hospitalis,* then my name isn't Nepos!"

But Tros's wits were working—furiously. It would not give him the slightest satisfaction to see Zeuxis crucified. Revenge on such a rascal was beneath his dignity. But if the man who had betrayed him could be made to undo the disaster at his own expense—

"Whatever Zeuxis did, I hold his *tessera,*" said Tros, "and I am bound by oath to treat him as a *hospes* until he or I repudiate the bond before witnesses. And it is I who should accuse him, not you, Nepos. I prefer to give him opportunity to purge his sacrilege."

"Impossible!" said Nepos. "There is no way of condoning that offense. It is against God; it is against Rome; it is against citizenship. Zeuxis—"

"Is my *hospes,*" Tros interrupted. "I implore you to refrain from interfering with him until I have my way first."

Nepos demurred: "If you were a Roman that might satisfy the gods, but you are not a Roman. *Jupiter hospitalis* looks to us Romans to uphold his dignity. However, I concede this—if you can find a way of punishing that scoundrel, do it. I will give you time before I inform Cato and have him crucified. Meanwhile, no warning him! If he escapes, I will hold you answerable! He who overlooks such sacrileges as that knave has committed is as guilty as if he had done it himself! I will set informers on the watch to make sure Zeuxis does not escape to foreign parts."

"So do," Tros answered. "That will serve me. Let me speak to my men. Can you put them elsewhere? That dungeon they are in stinks like an opened grave."

"I will move them to the upper cells," said Nepos, "if you will guarantee their good behavior."

Tros strode back to the grille, where he was greeted by another chorus of lament.

"Silence!" he commanded. "Who shall have patience with faithless fools who run after the first Greek that lies to them? Dogs! I have had to beg a better cell for you; and now I go to buy you from whoever sells such trapped rats! Let me hear of one instance of misbehavior between now and then, and I will leave the lot of you to rot here! Do you understand that? You are to obey this honorable Nepos absolutely until I come, and if he tells me of one disobedience these walls shall be the last your eyes will ever see!"

He turned his back, indignant that he should have to speak so cruelly to decent men, then followed Nepos to the steps, and to the upper iron gate, and daylight—where the stable smell was like the breath of roses after the abominable fetor of the dungeon.

As he walked off, he smiled wanly at the thought of how thoroughly cowed he had left his men, and for a moment he felt guilty of having been too harsh.

CHAPTER XCI

TROS FORMS AN ODYSSEYAN PLAN

In a world so full of rubbish that even rich men's wastrels find amusement, the most worthless trash of all is revenge. Justice knows not vengeance, or it is not justice. But I see no unwisdom in putting a spiteful fool to work to spite himself into a net, if so be that should suit my purpose.

From the Log of Tros of Samothrace

Tros made his way to Zeuxis' house in no haste, although Orwic was impatient. It was essential to take time to instruct Orwic thoroughly.

"Romans," he said, "have certain virtues, of which loyalty to certain customs is the greatest. They respect the Vestal Virgins and the law of hospitality. Whoever offends against those ancient institutions puts himself outside the pale and they regard him almost as no longer human. That is why Nepos turned on Zeuxis and befriended us. That is also why Pompey turned so suddenly against me. I have made one mistake after another, Orwic. If I had said nothing to the Vestals about Helene, Pompey very likely would have let my men go; more than likely one of his lieutenants seized them at Zeuxis' suggestion and Pompey knew nothing about it until afterward.

"It is not quite like Pompey to do such under-handed work. But then the Vestals told him not to interfere with me, and they also asked him to procure Helene's liberty. He jumped to the conclusion, I suppose, that Cæsar, the pontifex maximus, is trying to make use of the Vestals, and when I showed him Cæsar's seal that made him sure of it. No doubt he had already heard of Cæsar's swoop on Gades, which is in Pompey's province. He is beginning to feel nervous about Cæsar. I ought to have known he would resent having the Vestals drawn into politics. He probably made up his mind to have you and me thrown into the arena along with my men, to teach the Vestals a lesson. If Cæsar cared to take that up, Pompey could make a public issue of it and accuse Cæsar of tampering with Rome's most sacred institution. Now do you understand?"

"No, I don't!" said Orwic.

"Very well, then leave it to a man who does! Observe whether we are being followed, and hold your tongue while I think!"

But thought comes wrapped up in obscurity when men are irritated, and whichever way Tros switched his speculation difficulties seemed insuperable. He supposed Conops would be in the dungeons presently and he would have no means of learning when his ship arrived at Ostia nor any way of warning Sigurdsen to put to sea again and try some other port.

"There is nothing for it," he said finally, "but to try to use Helene's wits and Zeuxis' knavery! I have some money left, and fifty pearls, not counting the big ones I hid on the ship. Let us see what the gods can make of that material!"

"But what of me?" suggested Orwic. "I can out-ride any Roman! Get me a horse and let me find the way to Ostia. I can out-swim any Roman, too! Let me watch for the ship and swim out and warn Sigurdsen."

Tros turned sarcastic:

"You who can speak neither Greek nor Latin! It would be easier for you to find one bug in a dunghill than Conops in Ostia! Nay, Orwic, we stand at death's gate. Let us gut death together, if we can't scheme a way out."

The lean, impertinent-eyed eunuch at the gate announced that Zeuxis was away from home.

"Then he will find me here when he returns,' said Tros. "Admit me!"

"I have no such orders from my master," said the eunuch.

"Shall he find a dead slave at the gate?" Tros asked, his right hand on his dagger, so the eunuch changed his mood to an obsequious, sly suavity and Tros strode in.

And on the porch Helene greeted him, all laughter. She was dressed in pale blue silk from Alexandria, with roses in her hair and gilded sandals.

"I am washed clean—come and smell me! It took three women three hours to make me know there were no longer any vermin in my hair! Tros—Tros of Samothrace—"

"Have you seen Zeuxis?" he interrupted.

"Yes. He went to my house to take inventory and discover how much the public custodians stole—also to turn out the landlord's bailiffs. Zeuxis says it was you who betrayed me to Cato; but he pretends that he is sorry to hear that your men are in the *carceres,* and he also pretends to be worried about your fate. He proposes to restore my popularity by getting my Cappadocians entered in the *quadriga* race, but all the Thracian drivers who amount to anything are bought up—and besides, one can't trust them, because owners who have backed their chariots to win bribe even an honest man out of his senses."

She led into the courtyard by the fountain, where she lay luxuriously on a divan and ordered Zeuxis' slaves about as if she were the mistress of his household. Wine was brought.

"Already some of my friends talk of stabbing Cato in the Forum," she remarked. "They talk too loud, the hot-heads! I am here because I daren't go home for fear they may compromise me in some foolishness. I would rather have to love old Cato than be crucified for listening to plots against against him! Drink to me, Tros of Samothrace! Drink to the light in my eyes—I am told it resembles starlight on the Nile!"

Tros gulped wine, coughing to disguise embarrassment, so nervous that he could not even make believe to like her company. Her morals were no least concern of his; he knew his own strength. But he dreaded feminine intrigue as some men loathe the presence of a cat; it was indefinable but no less an obsession—almost superstition—probably heredity, due to his father's austere striving to prepare himself for the higher Samothracian Mysteries.

Helene studied him and laughed.

"Lord Tros," she said, "I like you better than the best in Rome! You challenge me! Are you a Stoic? I will wreck your stoicism! Come, drink to me—and smile a little while you do it—because I will certainly do you a great service. I perceive you are not to be won by being beaten but by being helped to succeed."

"Pearls you shall have," Tros answered, and she nodded, her eyes smoldering.

"Beware of me!" she said. "I am a great gambler. I play fair. I risk all on a throw. I would wreck Rome for the sake of what my heart is set on—aye, Rome and Alexandria, Cæsar and Pompey—and you and me! Now craftily—here is Zeuxis!"

Naturally, Zeuxis was not taken by surprise; the eunuch at the gate had warned him. He affected to be pleased—ran forward to embrace Tros—let his jaw drop with an exclamation of astoundment when Tros held him off.

"I heard you had been seized. I have rushed here and there endeavoring to find friends who could help you. I—Tros, I—"

Tros drew out the *tessera* and held it under Zeuxis' nose.

"Now—no lies! Zeuxis, I can call eight witnesses to prove that your father and my father took oath of *hospitium*. There is Xenophon the banker for one, and there are doubtless temple priests who will remember it. If you have burned your *tessera* or lost it, that is no affair of mine. The oath holds—father to son, father to son—and you have broken faith. No lies, I said! Don't make the matter worse!"

"You never claimed *hospitium*," said Zeuxis, stammering.

"I had no need. The oath holds whether talked about or not. Two *hospites* have no need to repeat their obligations to each other, more especially when you, whose life my father saved for the oath's sake, received me open-handedly. You said your house was mine. You bade me enter and possess it. Should I then have pinned you, like a lawyer, to the details of your obligation?"

"Tros, what does this mean? I have done you no wrong," Zeuxis stammered, glancing at Helene, and his eyes were shrewdly speculative although fear blanched his cheeks.

Helene, dangerous for very love of danger and in love with Tros and with intrigue and with amusement, nodded, reassuring him. He jumped to the conclusion she was loyal to himself.

"I have done you no wrong," he repeated, meeting Tros's gaze. "Who has lied to you?"

Conceiving that Helene was his friend, he let his mind slip sidewise like mercury to another possibility, but Tros now understood the man he had to deal with and interpreted the changed look in his eyes.

"Neither poison nor dagger nor any other kind of treachery will help you any longer, Zeuxis. You have shot your bolt! Nor will it help to have me waylaid and returned into the prison, where my men lie at the risk of plague. Your infamy is known! If I die, that will not absolve you. Mark this—masticate it—let it become all your consciousness and govern you. You have but two alternatives, death or my mercy!"

"You threaten me?" Zeuxis stuttered. Fear had robbed him of his wits at last; he was trembling.

"Aye, Zeuxis! And a threat from me binds me as inescapably as any other promise! You are watched, so you can not escape abroad. The Roman who knows of your crime against *Jupiter hospitalis* itches to make an example of you, but I begged the chance for you to make amends. I have not yet repudiated my share of the vow, although you broke yours. I will still protect you, if you turn about—now—smartly—and undo your sacrilege by helping me, as you have harmed me hitherto, with all your zeal and cunning! I will even lie for you in that event; I will deny that my misfortune was your doing."

Zeuxis' face changed color. Pride, resentment, fear all fought for the control of him, but fear prevailed—fear and perhaps a grain of gratitude.

"Tros, you are very generous. It is true that I lost the *tessera* and it escaped my mind; but you exaggerate the wrong I did, which was an indiscretion, not deliberate treachery. I took a slave into my confidence, who went and sold your men to Licius Severus, Pompey's master-of-the-horse, and it was too late then for me to—"

"Lie me no more lies!" Tros interrupted. "You intended to divide my pearls with Licius Severus! I will make him party to the sacrilege and have your slave's testimony taken on the rack if there is any doubt in your mind as to my earnestness! I know the law. An offense against *hospitium* is treason against Rome; so your slaves can be tortured against you—and you also! But I blame myself a little, Zeuxis; I should not have tempted you by telling you of all those pearls—which are in a safe place now, where neither you nor any other rogue can get them."

That last argument, like a knife that cuts two ways, instantly converted Zeuxis. Where the fear of punishment alone had undermined his will but left him infinitely capable of treachery, information that the pearls were out of reach removed all motive for infidelity. He wept and kneeling, clasping Tros's knees, begged him for forgiveness.

"Tros—honored *hospes*—I am dying of the shame this day has brought on me! Accept my—"

But Helene knew no sentimental qualms, nor had the slightest patience with them.

"Tros!" she exclaimed, rising. "What have you done with the pearls?"

She poised a wine-cup as if taking aim. She pointed one hand at Tros's eyes. Her own eyes glared. "Are you a pauper? Is your wealth gone?" She was much more beautiful in that guise than when trying to seduce. Beautiful—unlovely! Artificiality was stripped off. Her nature was more naked than her body had been when she fought the gladiator. She was a human cobra—honestly venomous—openly baffled and angry and revengeful.

"Tros!" she said. "Have you deceived me?"

"Aye," he answered. "It appears I made you think I fear you!"

He seized her wrist. She sprang at him, but he jerked her arm and twisted it behind her back until she bit her lips in agony—then lifted her by arm and leg and threw her sprawling in a corner, where she caught the curtain to break her fall and tore it from its rod.

"Bring me a whip!" he commanded. "Swiftly, Zeuxis! Did you hear me say a whip? This slave shall learn—"

But there was no need for the whip. The word "slave" whipped her better than the strongest arm could have. She was a slave pretending to be free. No doubt the hold that Cæsar, or more likely Cæsar's secret agent, had over her was just that fact, that she was slave-born. In an instant she could be thrown down from whatever pinnacle she might attain. Society protected itself ruthlessly against its victims. The slave found taking liberties with freedom could be sure of nothing less than scourging—would be lucky if not crucified—lashed to a gibbet, that is, and mocked by other slaves as death came slowly of thirst and flies and gangrene.

Helene groveled. She was too much of an artist in emotion to waste blandishments on Tros in that mood, and her slave-birth carried with it, as almost always, the peculiar slave-consciousness that crisis could bring to the surface, however deeply it was buried or however artfully concealed. The free man's scorn of slaves was not totally unjustified; tradition of the centuries, heredity, education, had instilled into the slave-born a subconsciousness of slavish spirit that mere manumission rarely overcame. It was not without inherent justice that the slave set free was still the former master's client and in many ways still bound to him, as well as denied many of the rights pertaining to a free-born citizen. Society had bred the slave and brutalized him, but it understood the problem. The slave-wars that had nearly ruined Rome had served to unite all free and freed men into one close corporation, ready to endure extremities of any kind in preference to imposition by its subject human beings. If discovered, it would not have helped Helene that her owner was of high estate and her abettor in the crime against society; not even Cæsar could have saved her then.

She laid her hands on Tros's feet, abject in submission on the floor in front of him. Her silence was a stronger plea than any words she might have spoken; she was pleading not alone for Tros's silence but for his protection, too, from Zeuxis who had heard the word "slave," who understood, and was incapable of not exploiting the discovery unless Tros should prevent.

"Get up!" Tros ordered. She obeyed, with all the cobra-venom gone—a piece of merchandise, worth nothing if denounced. Not Pompey, with his power to impose his will on four-fifths of the senate, could have saved her if the truth were known. For the moment she was too submissive to imagine the alternative that she had threatened through the grating of the prætor's cell; she did not feel sufficiently her own to kill herself.

That mood, Tros understood, would not last long. Her elasticity would set her scheming presently. Unless he guided the reaction she would turn more desperately dangerous than she had been. He supplied the necessary ray of hope:

"I go to Cæsar soon," he said. "I have obtained a lien on Cæsar's influence. Obey me wholly—without flinching—and I will not only give you the pearls I promised, but I will also demand that Cæsar shall manumit you."

"Cæsar doesn't own me," she said dismally. "I am only rented to him by Rabirius."

"Good. Cæsar shall instruct Rabirius, who is in fear of an impeachment and will bid high for Cæsar's influence with the judges. Meanwhile—" he turned on Zeuxis—"Silence! Spare that woman as I spare you! As the gods are all about us, I will ruin you if you betray her!" Then he swung around again and faced Helene. "Fail me in one batting of an eyelid and you shall see what happens to the slave caught posing as a free-born woman!"

He began to pace the floor as if it were his own poop, striding the length of the room and back again, to judge, under lowered eyelids, when he turned, the speed and the extent of Zeuxis' and Helene's recovery—intending they should not recover too far before he yoked them, as it were, and set them working. He had handled far too many mutinies at sea to let much time lapse between victory and imposition of a task.

"My men lie rotting in the dungeons," he said suddenly. "My ship makes Ostia, and my man Conops very likely has been picked up by the prætor's men or by some of Pompey's followers. I need help. Where shall I find it?"

"I have influence with Nepos," Zeuxis began, and paused. The smile on Tros's face was sardonic; there was something enigmatic in the way he stood with folded arms. "Nepos might—"

"Let us talk about to-day, not yesterday!" said Tros, "and of what you will do, not what Nepos might do. What is this about the races and the team of Cappadocians? Are you so situated you can enter that team?"

"Easily," said Zeuxis.

"In Helene's name?"

"Yes, under red or white, but she has no charioteer except the Sicilian who keeps the horses exercised—a freed man—a good trainer, but sure to lose his head when an opponent crowds him to the *spina* * and the spectators begin yelling. He would also certainly be bribed to lose the race."

"What if a charioteer is found?" Tros asked.

"Who knows? If I knew the man I would bet on the Cappadocians. Otherwise I would bet just as heavily against them."

"Here is the man," said Tros. He laid a hand on Orwic's shoulder. "This is the best horseman from a land where chariot driving is the measure of a man's worth. I have seen Prince Orwic drive unbroken horses. He has magic in his hands, or in his voice, or else he owns an extra sense akin to seamanship, that says 'yes' and can make the horses say it when the gods themselves appear to say 'no'! Let him see those Cappadocians, and rig them in a chariot, and feel their helm a time or two. Let him con the course and memorize the landmarks. Then there is utterly no doubt who wins, if those four Cappadocians can run!"

It took an hour to stir enthusiasm. Zeuxis and Helene were both crushed; he had to coax them back to confidence. Zeuxis could think of a thousand doubts as to the value of the plan, and of its outcome even if successful. It was all discussed in front of Orwic, who ignorant of Greek or Latin—and they talked both—did not understand one word of it.

"Most charioteers are slaves," said Zeuxis. "Some are freed men, and the rest are of the type of gladiators—that is to say, regarded with contempt. But your friend Orwic is a prince. What will he say when he learns that the mob, which roars itself hoarse for the winner and heaps flowers on him, nevertheless thinks a charioteer no better than a gladiator—meaner, that is, than itself?"

"Who cares what a mob thinks? No task can lower a man," Tros answered. "It is men who lower their profession. If the Lord Orwic were an upstart or a mere inheritor of titles he might flinch from such a stigma, but I brought no flinchers when I picked my crew! If he had thought whatever he might do for Britain possibly could be beneath his dignity, believe me, he would be in Britain now, not sharing my adventures! Orwic!" he said suddenly, "how long is it since you made sacrifice to any god whatever?"

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* Spina: The structure down the midst of the arena, at the ends of which the racing chariots had to turn.

Orwic rose out of a chair and yawned, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Long enough for all the gods to have forgotten me," he answered.

"Are you willing to make sacrifice?"

"Aye, to your necessity. Some gain might come of that. But you have taught me not to whimper to the gods. I do nothing by halves, Tros. I have come to expect the gods to serve me, not I them."

"They will serve you best clean-shaven," Tros observed, "because the prætor's men are very likely looking for a prince with a moustache! The gods might prefer the Gaulish costume to the Roman, when the prætor's men are looking for a Briton in a Roman tunic! It is easiest to coax the gods by doing what one does best."

"I can hunt, ride, fight and drive a chariot," said Orwic, "nothing else. I am one of those unfortunates born out of time—as useless as a pig's tail. Two or three hundred years ago I might have amounted to something."

"Go and let Zeuxis' barber shave you. We will see what you can do," said Tros. Then to Helene, "Go and give your thanks to Pompey. Overwhelm him with your gratitude for having freed you from the prætor, and beg leave to reward him for his generosity by entering your Cappadocians in his name, to be driven by a Gaulish charioteer named—named—let us see, Ignotus."

CHAPTER XCII

IGNOTUS

I was born among wisemen. My father was a Prince of Wisdom. In Alexandria I attended the schools of philosophy, by nature nonetheless observant of the uses to which wisdom may be put, and never fond of thinking without doing. Unused wisdom is a vinegary wine that rots its barrel. There is no end of wisdom, but a swift end for him who forgets that wisdom flows, it is not stagnant. Speaking for myself, I have never found a set of circumstances that a little wisdom could not unravel; no error that a little wisdom could not remedy. But wisdom is not in book or bag. It is a stream, and down-stream it is foul with yesterday's mistakes. Let a man look toward its source, and dip thence; he shall not lack inspiration.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

THE Circus Maximus reëchoed to the shouts of charioteers schooling their teams at the turns, and to the hum of the voices of extravagantly well-dressed loungers gathered in groups near the gate where the chariots entered, or sprawling on the seats reserved for *equites,* to watch the practice gallops and lay bets or learn the latest rumors about who had bribed which charioteer.

There was a new bay-colored team of Cappadocians yoked to a chariot embossed with Pompey's monogram and driven by a young, athletic looking man in Gaulish costume who drove them at a walk around the course so many times that the observers presently lost interest. Then, suddenly, he launched the team into a frenzied gallop, reining in again before he reached the turn.

"Did you see that? All four on their toes at once—as sudden as a javelin! That man will bear watching!" said a dissolute-faced youngster, leaning on his elbows over the barrier near the box reserved for patrons of the games.

"Better watch Helene," his companion suggested. "That is her team. The charioteer is probably her slave, and she's as crooked as Rabirius, who is said to have adopted her in Alexandria because she knew too much about his goings on! Have you heard the latest? Cato had her arrested, and Pompey interfered! Some say Pompey did it to oblige Rabirius as a desperate effort to keep on friendly terms with Cæsar. And by the way, there's news this morning: Cæsar has invaded Britain. Cæsar's agent is backing Rabirius, whom Cato wants to prosecute for extortion in Alexandria; and now everybody is wondering what concessions Pompey had to make to Cato to get Helene out of his clutches."

"Oh, didn't you hear?" said the other, with the air of a man who always knew the news. "My steward was told by the barber who shaves Cato's secretary, that Pompey had to agree to leave Nepos in charge of the dungeons. There was talk, you know, of one of Pompey's veterans getting that job. They say Julia has sentimental prejudices and wanted a venial rascal in there who would substitute a corpse for any prisoner whom she thought unjustly condemned. But the doctor who physics Lavinia's slaves was told by one of Pompey's doctor's slaves that Julia is dying, so I daresay Pompey didn't think it worthwhile arguing. Old Cato is a Roman if there ever was one."

"Nonsense! He's a bundle of old-fashioned prejudices, with as much sense as a last year's statue on a dust-heap!"*

"Never mind. He enforces the law. When a criminal has been condemned he dies in the arena. No more slaves or substitutes while Nepos is in charge and Cato shuffles off to the slums to talk with him half the night! I have old-fashioned notions. I rather admire Cato, although I admit, I would not like to entertain him in my house; he would probably arrive bare-footed, bring in the lictor with him, and discuss morality. Watch that team now!"

The Cappadocians at last were being sent around the course at full speed, he who drove them displaying none of the histrionics generally practised by charioteers to excite the crowd. He did not shake the reins or shout; he did not fan the horses with his whip; he stood as rigidly erect as possible, allowing for knees bent to absorb motion as the chariot bumped behind the stretched out team; but any judge of speed—and there were scores of them looking on—knew instantly that this was faster than any chariot had moved that morning. There was magic in the driver's hands, that loosed four horses in one spasm, as it were, of concentrated force.

"Who is he? Look at that! *Jupiter omnipo—*"

There were ten teams practising. Most of the charioteers were taking short spurts at the turns to teach their horses how to cut in when another chariot was forced outward by its own momentum at the curve. As Orwic whirled at top speed around the far end of the *spina* two other charioteers deliberately swung into his path, pretending not to see him!

"Gemini!"

He dodged between them as a hare slips in between the hounds, made time to lash one charioteer across the face with the butt end of his whip and, striking the other's wheel with his own hub, spilled him, hardly seeming to have lost speed, turning to laugh at the man sprawling among struggling horses.

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* It was no unusual thing to make space in the Forum by removing the statues of forgotten politicians. These were either thrown away or re-chiseled to represent a more recent political favorite.

"That's the team I bet on! The man knows his business! Mark you—that was no accident. Those are slow teams turned out purposely to injure him. Some one with a big bet is afraid of him. He shall carry my money."

"Aye—to Hades, if you're such an idiot! If they think he stands a chance of winning—the better he is, the worse for him! If they can't wreck him in the practice gallops he'll be dead before the day comes, or else some one will poison his horses or saw through the chariot axle! When did a man ever win who wasn't so well known that nobody dared to play foul? Probably Helene is in need of money, in which case the exhibition is simply an invitation to bribe her to withdraw the team or else to guarantee to lose the race!"

Meanwhile, Tros was wasting no time watching Orwic, who, well warned, was living with the horses day and night with two hired Gaulish gladiators to protect him. Though Helene had entered the team under Pompey's name, that was in some ways a disadvantage, because Pompey himself had returned to his villa to be with his ailing wife and had left all arrangements for the coming games in the hands of one of his lieutenants. There were fourteen races to be run before the third day of the games, when butchery of prisoners and combats between gladiators would begin, so Pompey's worried manager was best not approached; if asked to protect Helene's charioteer he would probably have done exactly the opposite, to avoid the risk of losing friendships among influential *equites*, who would object to losing money through an unknown charioteer's surprise victory. There was as much corruption in the races as in politics, and there was also jealousy from Pompey's own great racing stable to consider.

But Tros had to depend not only on Orwic's victory, but on the acclamations of the crowd. He had to make Orwic popular, while he himself kept out of sight for fear of being recognized by any one who might report him to the prætor. Nepos had refused to intervene with Cato, saying he could not afford to lose the prætor's friendship; more, when Tros went to him with fruit and vegetables for his men, he said: "Are you a turn-coat after all that bold boast?

Get away from Rome then, now, before it's too late. Your men must tread the sand unless orders come from Cato or the senate. You have three more days, so stir yourself! I have told Cato you are in the *carceres*—which is near enough to the truth; I hold your promise. Cato says you have been plotting against Rome, besides intriguing with the Vestals. If Cato catches you, he'll only send you to me. There's nothing I can do, unless you want yourself run through the thigh. You might appeal then to the Vestals. They might dare to protect you; but if they should look away I would have to order out the masks* and hooks. I would prefer to fight it out if I were you."

So Tros kept Zeuxis and Helene hard at work manipulating Rome's news-avid underworld. They sent their slaves into the city to inform whoever had a ticket for the games that it was safe to bet on Helene's Cappadocians and the charioteer Ignotus. Rumor having spread that Cæsar had already attacked Britain, advantage was taken of that to excite superstition. It was whispered, as a deadly secret—which naturally spread like wild-fire—that Ignotus was a Gaul and had been sent by Cæsar to foreshadow his own success in Britain by winning a victor's laurel in the Circus Maximus.

The mob loved Cæsar and his everlasting triumphs over foreigners, whose property poured into Rome, so there were only enough doubters to keep the odds against Helene's Cappadocians comparatively tempting. The Jews, Greeks and Armenians, who openly conducted lawless betting dens under the eyes of bribed officials, did a thriving business.

Three of Zeuxis' slaves were sent to Ostia to try to find out what had become of Conops, failing which they were to watch for Tros's ship and send word by runner. But the first message they sent back was to the effect that Conops had vanished as if earth had swallowed him and that there was no sign of the ship, although two triremes, with full crews on board, were anchored near the harbor-mouth and seemed to be expecting action.

Tros made one desperate effort to reach the Vestals and appeal for their protection. But Pompey had begun to pave the way for a public protest against the Vestals' alleged intriguing in behalf of Cæsar. Their palace was heavily guarded. Even when the Vestals went to change the watch over the undying flame they walked between two lines of armed men, who turned their backs toward them and faced the other way. Tros did not dare to draw attention to himself.

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* The men in masks came out to kill the wounded before other men put hooks under their armpits and dragged them out.

So he had to pin his whole faith to the wildest plan ever a desperate man invented! Orwic *must* be the victor in the last *quadriga* race on the third day, when the crowd would already be mad with excitement. Orwic *must* win money for the crowd as well as foretell Cæsar's coming triumph. That was something that the gods and Orwic must contrive between them. Then, the races over, Orwic must join Tros in the *carceres* and sally forth the next day into the arena, while the crowd still loved him, and so make Tros and his Northmen popular. Whether they should have to fight Numidians or beasts, Orwic must appear to be the leader; Tros himself would simply guard the young man's back and rally the Northmen when they needed it. Then, when the foes were beaten—as they *must* be!—Tros, acting as interpreter for Orwic, would appeal to the spectators—to the Vestals—even to Pompey himself as the patron of the games! The odds were half a million to one against the plan's success—and yet no other plan was possible.

There was nothing to count on but the mob's emotion, absolutely unpredictable, although the Roman mob was sometimes generous toward prisoners who showed good sport. The Vestals, if the mob were not enthusiastic, might not dare to give the signal to let Tros and his companions go free. Possibly Pompey had conveyed a hint to them. But if they did dare, nobody would question the decision afterward—not even Pompey himself.

And meanwhile, not a sign from Conops—not a hint of where the ship might be. She might be wrecked. Or Sigurdsen might have flinched from the risk of putting into Ostia and, turning pirate, might have set forth on a mad cruise of his own. And Cæsar already invading Britain. Probably Cæsar was short of men because of the lack of shipping and the dire necessity to hold Gaul with numberless garrisons all ready for emergency. But even now Caswallon and his Britons might be fighting desperately for their Lunden Town. He could almost hear Fflur saying:

"Tros will defeat Cæsar. Never doubt him!"

And last, not least, Helene added to the climax of perplexities. When he told her his plan and she understood he had nothing to depend on but the very doubtful generosity of the spectators, she recovered self-possession. The cobra-venom in her took a new lease of existence.

"Tros," she said, "Lord Tros, you are no judge of women, but to judge men shrewdly is my one gift. I find you admirable. You can thrill me as no man ever did, and you can make me flinch without a blow, which is a rapturous sensation now I come to think of it. And I adore a man who is so faithful that the very Roman headsman trusts him! Nevertheless, I think you are the least wise man I ever saw!"

"Rot me your opinion!" Tros exploded. "Save your own skin by obedience."

"Lord Tros," she answered, smiling, "I believe I know a better way than all this trusting to your gods, and to the crowd. I don't believe in any gods, not having seen them, but I know the Romans; I have seen them sobbing at the death of elephants and howling in the next breath for the death-blow to a brave man, simply for the lust to see a man die! A good gamble is exciting, and the game has most zest when the stakes are highest. But why give too long odds, when there is a better chance, and more to win, in an equally exciting game?"

"What treachery do you brew now?" Tros wondered, staring at her.

"None. Tros, I love you! I would rather die with you in the arena than betray you or see you lose.

"Tros," and there was anger in her eyes now, "do not doubt me. I will gamble with you to the end, and I will do my utmost to prepare the crowd to set you free by acclamation. But remember —if you go free, that will be in part my doing. I will have a claim on you."

"True. I will remember it," said Tros. "Pearls you shall have, and your freedom when I reach Cæsar."

"If you leave Rome, I come too!" she retorted. "Do you think my heart is anything to trifle with? And it is easier to shake off war's scars than—"

She perceived she had not even penetrated through his thoughts of fifty other matters that obsessed him.

"Conops," he said, looking absent-minded, "may have fallen foul of drink and women. He is a faithful little rascal, but the wine-shops on the harbor-front of Ostia—"

Helene laughed—abruptly—bitterly. "Tros, do you think I am not worth more to you than any longshore sailor?"

"Deep-sea sailor," he corrected.

She ignored the interruption.

"I have said, I love you. I have never loved until I saw you—never!"

"Tchutt! That reminds me," said Tros, "I must take care of Zeuxis."

"It is I not Zeuxis who will cause the crowd to free you," she retorted. "I am spending all my money. I am even begging the favor of Lucius Petronius—that dog!—if he will use his influence among the *equites*. And do you think I will let you leave me to Petronius? You shall take me with you, or you shall never leave Italy!"

But Tros was thinking of Caswallon and the Trinobantes, probably retreating before Cæsar's doggedly advancing legions. He could almost see Caswallon's kind face and the eyes of Fflur. Almost he could hear Fflur speak:

"The Lord Tros will never desert us. Somehow he will find a way to worry Cæsar's rear. Tros never would forget a friendship."

Slowly the far-away look in his eyes relaxed, and the frown melted. As he threw off that mood, he laid his hand abruptly on Helene's shoulder—not particularly gently, noticing the strength of her young muscles, smiling at the thought that she should waste affection on him.

"Woman," he said, cheerfully, "if you prefer to ruin me, arrange for me to die in the arena! Now I go to give my men encouragement. If you love me, as you say, then watch for my man Conops. If he comes contrive to let him reach me. And one other thing—attend to it that Zeuxis sends into the *carceres* those weapons that my men left in bundles in his charge."

"I am yours," she answered. "I will serve you. But remember—I am yours as much as any of your men and you shall not desert me! Tros, I have warned you! Did you hear me? Did you understand?"

CHAPTER XCIII

CONOPS

In Alexandria there are slaves who teach philosophy, and they are good teachers. From a slave I learned the trick of calculus by which I built the ship I visioned, whereas all he saw was calculus. It is true, I have found my freedom is slavery to the daily need to enlarge it, lest it grow less and ensnare me into love of thinking but not doing. But I find my slavery is less humiliating than that other.

Nevertheless, there are men whose virtue lacks direction. Such men need a master, to whom they yield obedience in exchange for stanch exaction of the best they can do. Not being God, I know not why this is, but I observe it. I myself would willingly obey a man who could exact from me more than I give to the men who obey my commands.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

IN cellars, dens and storerooms under the tiers of wooden seats, in the dungeons, and in the big, stone-walled enclosures at either end of the Circus Maximus pandemonium reigned for many days before a public spectacle. In nothing had the Romans carried organization to such a pitch as in the management of public games, so discipline prevailed in spite of frantic haste and privileged interference. The actual control was in the hands of experts, many of whom were foreigners, and each of whom knew the last detail of his own particular responsibility.

The giver of the games—he who paid the bill—was only nominally in authority; he left all details to subordinates, of whom the greater number were, like Nepos, permanently employed by the city and responsible to elected officials. They resented the officious interference of the patron's own men, whose ambition naturally was to produce a spectacle more magnificent and thrilling than any one that had preceded it, the whole purpose of the spectacle—originally a religious rite—being to increase the patron's fame.

Pompey lacked—and his lieutenants knew he lacked—a true grip on the popular imagination. His tastes were literary and artistic.

He loathed the brutal exhibitions that had become the crowd's first test of a man's fitness to hold public office. Although his agents scoured the earth for animals and gladiators, though his school of gladiators was the best in Rome, and though his racing-stable was superbly managed, beyond ordering his treasurer to pay the bills he gave scant personal attention to any of those interests, preferring his country estate and his library, both lavishly adorned with plunder that he brought home from his conquests in the East.

Pompey was a man whose natural ability was undermined by vanity and by contempt for details. It pleased him to believe that, in his own phrase, he could stamp his foot and raise an army—to accomplish any purpose. Temperamentally he was lazy, vain and opportunist; politically he was autocratic but averse to civil violence except in so far as it was necessary to enforce his own convenience; his own lieutenants were as arrogant and violent as any men in Rome, but he upheld them. Theoretically he was opposed to looting, but he had enriched himself by that means; in speech and writing he condemned corruption, but his own front garden at election time was set with tables, at which his corps of secretaries handed out the money for the votes. His magnanimity was frequently spectacular and very often genuine, particularly if it ministered to pride; but he could shut his eyes to things he did not want to know, with almost ox-like indifference—in which respect he was so far inferior to Cæsar that there was no comparing the two, politically. Cæsar ignored nothing. Pompey, equally an opportunist, blazed out of retirement, exercised his genius until he wearied of it, and withdrew again.

Naturally, his character had bred a corresponding attitude of mind in his lieutenants, who irritated Cæsar at every opportunity and looked to Pompey to control the consequences. It was well known, even to outsiders, that the only bond of peace between the two men was the fact that Cæsar's daughter Julia was Pompey's wife and that Pompey was extremely fond of her. Cæsar depended on Julia to preserve at least the outward appearance of friendship, although it was a moot question whether she deliberately fed Cæsar's ambition or was simply eager to contrive peace.

Now, although the doctors held out hopes of Julia's recovery, they only deceived Pompey who, as usual, believed what it pleased him to believe and shut his eyes to an alternative. None who had seen her recently had any doubt that Julia was dying; and none doubted that when Julia was dead the open breach with Cæsar must inevitably follow. Pompey's closest friends, in fact, were eager for the issue; it was clear to them that Cæsar's influence was gaining and delay increased his chances of success. The time to split the breach wide open was while Cæsar's hands were full in Gaul and Britain.

So the men who took over the Circus Maximus in Pompey's interest determined that the crowd should recognize him as the greatest entertainer who had ever squandered his munificence on Rome. They would make Cæsar's entertainments, recklessly extravagant though these were, fade from the public memory. They nearly drove the staff of regular attendants mad with their interference and Nepos, for instance, cursed the very name of Pompey. The dens and cages under the high tiers of seats, and the cellars below those, were so packed with roaring animals, and the stench from them was so atrocious, that it was even doubted whether horses would be manageable during the three days chariot-racing that were to precede the slaughter.

The dungeons were so thronged that no excuse was needed for confining Tros's men in wooden cells above the level of the ground. Nepos even used the Northmen to help spread the loads of coarse sand brought in by countless carts from the sandpits near the Via Appia and many another prisoner toiled in fetters, hoping that goodwill might cause him to be spared some last indignity. The risk of fire was so great that the whole of Crassus' fire-brigade and all the sailormen ashore in Ostia were summoned to stand watch, with the result that two whole crowded streets of Rome were gutted by the fires which raged with no one to extinguish them. All Rome talked of nothing but the coming games.

Nepos, who never went home now but spent day and night attending to his prisoners and rearranging groups for this and that atrocious butchery, made quite a confidant of Tros, invited him to share his hurried meals and grumbled to him about every countermanded order and new interference with his plans.

"Why can't they leave it to men who have done this kind of thing all their lives? Take your men, for instance. First, I was to send them in to fight Numidians. That would have been good; but, some fool thought it would be better to send them against Roman gladiators, who would finish them off and then slaughter the blacks —which would have been a sort of compliment to the ever-victorious Roman legions.

"Well, that wouldn't have been so bad, although it would have cost like Cannæ in expensive gladiators. But some other idiot remembered your men are criminals and not entitled to a fair chance. One man said I shouldn't give them weapons. I had Hercules' own labor to convince that stupid fool—he's one of Pompey's favorites and probably the man who agreed with Zeuxis to put you in trouble for sake of your pearls.—Did you have pearls? Did the wrong man get them from you? This job looks to me like spite."

"I have fifty, and a little money," Tros said, looking keenly at him.

"Well, you can't buy me! If you get out of this you will need all —but I don't believe that's possible. If it's a case of masks and hooks that cloak of yours shall hang on my wall. I will keep an eye on the men who drag you to the *spoliarium*. That fool argued that you and your men are criminals and should be torn by beasts; he tried to bribe me to have you trapped somehow and used on the bulls that Cæsar sent here recently. When he sees you in the arena he'll be surprised. He'll expect me to claim that bribe. Maybe I will! Luckily for you Cæsar's agents wouldn't let us have the bulls; Cæsar expects to use them for his own show later on. I insisted you're not regular criminals, not having been committed by a judge, and somebody might hold me liable if I should send you in unable to protect yourselves. Then they thought of a new notion—not a bad one either. Your men are to have the weapons they're used to and fight lions; then Numidians; then, if they survive that, Roman gladiators. And now listen; I'm an old hand at this business. Since you're going in with them they'll have a leader, and that makes a big difference.

"The longer you last the better the crowd will like you, unless they suspect you of stalling. On the other hand, you'll have to use caution. If you're too cautious the overseers will order out the whips and hot irons to inspire you. You must take a very careful middle course. If you overcome the Numidians too easily the populace will lust to see the tables turned on you and you'll get no mercy when the gladiators lay you on the sand. But if you lose a few men to the lions, and some more to the Numidians, and then fight well against the gladiators, they'll take pity on you from the benches. What do you say? Shall I promise a few pearls to Glaucus—he fights with the sword and buckler and has never been touched once—he's in his prime—unbeatable. For half a dozen pearls he would run you through the thigh. And Glaucus is a decent fellow—good-natured—gallant—knows how to throw an attitude, and smile, with his foot on a man's body, that persuades the crowd to spare his victim nearly every time."

Tros nodded.

"Mind you, I can't guarantee the populace," said Nepos. "But if your man, Orwic, wins his race, and joins you, and plays leader against beasts and men; and if you fight capably, I think they will wave their handkerchiefs. If the applause is loud enough the Vestals are almost sure to add their verdict, and whether they order you released or not I can pretend I understood that. I should say you have a fifty to one chance, which is more than most men have who go in under my auspices!"

Tros thanked him.

"Don't offer me money!" said Nepos. "I'm old and don't need it. I'm devoted to justice, like Cato. I like to see the enemies of Rome die, but I prefer to give an honest man a chance. And by the way, remember about the lions. They'll be half-starved, two to every one of you, and each will get a touch of hot iron as he comes out of the trap. Nine men out of ten get killed by striking at them too soon. Coax them, if you can, to spring. Then duck—don't spring aside—and rip them up from under. The worst are those that don't spring but lurk and then come running at you. Then what you chiefly need is luck, but the best plan is to run at them—meet them midway; sometimes then they flinch. Flinching costs life, man or beast; and mark you—never try to avoid them! Meet them head on. They can claw you sidewise quicker than a knife-stab."

Tros went to instruct his men and met less trouble than he feared. It thrilled the Northmen that their leader had preferred to share their fate, though they had walked into a trap like fools. Their own tradition, that a death in battle was a passport to the halls of everlasting revelry, was no half-hearted superstition; they regarded life as an exordium to death. They would have gloomed if left alone; with Tros to lead them they were jubilant.

Tros borrowed a harp and set the *skald* to singing legends of Valhalla, until the Northmen roared the old familiar refrains and even the homesick Britons joined in, experts at a tune, although the vowel sounds they made instead of words were meaningless. So Nepos sent them wine, because their chanting cheered the other prisoners and it was half his battle to get men into the arena looking like men and not carcasses already three parts dead. The hot iron and the whip could work a semblance of rebellious indifference, but song, so rarely heard within those walls, made men again of tortured riff-raff, who were lucky—as Nepos tactfully assured them—not to have been crucified at crossroads with their entrails showing through the wounds made by the scourge.

There was wine for all the prisoners the last three nights, because Tros persuaded Nepos to permit it and himself defrayed the cost, but the effect of that was largely offset by precautions against suicide; men fettered hand and foot watched by slaves with heated irons are not easily encouraged. There were cries from a few caught opening a vein against a fetter's roughed edge or attempting to strangle each other. They were whipped for it, burned, then lashed to the pillars to keep them from trying again. The roaring of the beasts—beginning to be starved now—made night horrible, and there had been a grim rehearsal in the afternoon that left its impress on the prisoners' minds. The picture was ineradicable—of the empty seats, where presently free Romans and their wives and daughters would lean gasping, lips parted, to gloat at the carnage.

Nine elephants, tortured to make them dangerous, were trumpeting their indignation. Wolves, that were to tear their next meal from the throats of unarmed men, howled in melancholy chorus. Bulls bellowed; and a great rhinoceros—a rarity Rabirius had begged from Ptolemy the Piper—pounded his cage with a noise like a splintering ship. One whole cage full of leopards got loose in the night and wrought havoc before they were cornered with torches and netted. The torches set fire to the planks of the seats overhead, and when that was extinguished the carpenters came to rebuild, so that morning might find the arena undamaged—new-painted—agleam in the sun.

It was under the din of the hammers, through the mingled stink and clamor of the beasts, that Tros heard a voice he thought he recognized. At first he mocked himself, believing he was dreaming. There were no lights, saving where the braziers glowed and where a guard or two moved phantom-like in gloom, occasionally pausing to insert a lamp between the bars and make sure that no prisoner should cheat the appetite of Rome by smothering himself. A shadow seemed to move within the shadow that lay slanting at the bars of Tros's cage—Nepos had assigned him to the cage-of-honor, reserved for women as a rule, where a breath of air could enter through the bars whenever any one passed through the wooden door into the unroofed arena. But Tros thought he had imagined that. He even looked away, not liking that imagination should deceive him; it suggested that the horror of the situation had begun to undermine his self-control.

But the voice spoke louder:

"Master! This is Conops! I am come from Ostia! I have three boats below the fish-wharf on the Tiber! Sigurdsen picked up a breeze off Corsica and now stands off and on before the harbor-mouth, where two great triremes lie at anchor."

"How is it I had no word from you before this?" Tros demanded.

"Master, when I got to Ostia I knew that was no place for me! There were women and wine—no sight of Sigurdsen—I couldn't have resisted. So I stole a sail-boat and took with me a one-eyed slave, who called me brother. He wanted to escape to Corsica, where there are outlaws in the mountains, so he helped me to steal provisions from the stores behind the sheds where the imported slaves are quarantined, and we put to sea by night. I knew Sigurdsen would keep clear of the coast of Italy for fear of triremes. And I knew the pilot was a duffer who would want to sight land frequently. There was also food and water to consider; Sigurdsen would have to make some port of call before he dared put into Ostia with the chance of being chased away before he could reprovision; and besides, he would know you might want to put to sea at once, so he would fill the corn-bins and the water-butts at least. I picked him up the fourth day—saw his purple sails against the skyline.

"There was not much mutiny aboard. Such as it was soon quieted when I climbed over the rail. I gave them news of you. I said the Roman senate had proclaimed you admiral! But master, master, what is this! What—"

"Swiftly with your tale!" Tros ordered.

"I returned with the ship, and when we sighted Ostia we had to put that Roman pilot in the fore-peak. He was up to mischief, trying to lay us on a sandbank where the trireme men could come and pick us clean in the name of salvage. We had brought along Bagoas, the slave. We shaved his head and I rubbed some stain on him, but he understood that the disguise wouldn't help him if he didn't act right. He was so afraid of being recognized and flogged to death for escaping that I had hard work to get him ashore.

"I was for hurrying to Rome. But the first Roman I met after I reached shore stopped me and asked whether I was Conops. I couldn't even talk Greek, naturally. I was from the western coast of Gaul and none too handy with any kind of speech, but quick-footed; and it was dark, so that was the last I saw of him. It seemed proper then to peel an eye before I cast off, so I sent Bagoas to a wine-shop to discover what was being said—you know the wine-shop near the rope-walk, where the big fat Jewess sells charms against scurvy and all the freed men go to learn the shipping news? I didn't give Bagoas enough money to get drunk, and pretty soon he overheard a loud-mouthed man who was looking for two lost gladiators. He was from Rome that hour. I had the news of you as soon as One-Eye had swallowed his *quartarius*.

"One-Eye wanted to be rid of me then, so I warned him I'd sell him to informers if he didn't stand by, and I promised him a billet on the ship if he behaved himself. He was a stoker in the baths before he ran, so anything looked good to him. I sent him back to Sigurdsen that night with orders to send our longboat and a dozen Northmen with a week's provisions. They were to row straight up-Tiber—there's no tide worth mentioning, and the stream isn't too swift, not for one of our boat's crews. They were to wait for me where the barges lie anchored below the brick-kilns on the south side of the river. Then I hired two more boats—good ones—money down; and there was big fish, tons of it, all waiting to be boated up to Rome as soon as ever the slave-gangs came down stream. But something had delayed the slave-gangs and the fish was liable to rot, so I made a bargain to boat that fish to Rome at half price, they to load it and the merchant to give me a pass in writing in the name of Nicephorus of Crete. That made me right with any one who might ask questions. Then I ran up-river to the brick-kilns and fetched the Northmen; and what between rowing and towing, and they not knowing any human language so they couldn't answer questions, we made Rome all right; and the man who paid me for delivering the fish agreed to give me a cargo of empty oil-jars if I'd cut the price and wait a week.

"I stipulated he should give my men a shed to sleep in, down there by the Tiber, and what with hinting I might do a bit of smuggling for him, and my not seeming to know the price of freightage on the Tiber, we struck up quite a friendship and the crew are as safe as weevils in a loaf of bread. They're supposed to be Belgæ, taken captive by Cæsar and sold in Gaul. I told him I'd left the papers for them with a Roman in Ostia who lent me money on that security; so he won't try any tricks; they'll be there when we want them.

"Then I went to Zeuxis' house, and found Helene talking with him. Something's up. They're hatching something. But she said where you are, so I brought Bagoas and came here to apply for a job to rig the awnings over the spectators' seats. That let me into the arena and the rest was easy. One of the guards here thinks I'm a slave belonging to the blacksmith who was fetched in a hurry to repair the hinges on the dungeon gate—the one that opens into the arena. That's his sledge you hear.

"But now, master, what next? I'm only a seafaring man, and I've probably overlooked a lot of things, but you just say the word and I'll do my best for you, by Heracles. I've left Bagoas out in the arena, where he's chewing onions and waiting for the dawn to go on rigging. We can easily escape into the street. What then? I'm at the rope's end. There are three boats waiting, and a good crew. We can row downstream like Hermes-in-a-hurry—but how get you out of here?"

Tros reached an arm between the bars and gripped his shoulder.

"Little man," he said; and then, for a few heart-beats there was nothing he could say at all.

"Go you back to Sigurdsen," he ordered. "Bid him stand by in the offing five more days. Then, if I come not, divide the ship between you—he to be captain, you lieutenant, sharing profits equally. But I believe that I will come before the five days. Go you back to Sigurdsen and take Bagoas."

"Nay, I will not!" Conops answered. "I will stay here. You have been my master since I taught you how to splice a rope-end and—"

"You shall obey me!" Tros retorted. "Go you and tell Sigurdsen I come in five days. Say nothing more to him—unless I come not—only bid him watch those triremes in the port of Ostia and show them his heels if they put to sea. But on the fourth day, or the fifth day after you reach Sigurdsen, if you should see our three boats putting out, stand in then with all three oar-banks manned and all sail ready to be shaken down. Stand by to pluck us out from right under the triremes' noses if you must."

"But, master—"

"Mutiny? In this pass? You are the man I have always trusted, Conops. Do as I bid you!"

"Master, if we never meet again—"

"By Heracles, if I could get out I would break your head for such dog's whimpering! Obey! Step lively! Shall the gods come to the aid of men who drown good bravery with tears like pork in brine? Of what use is a sentimental lingerer by cell-doors? Do you think this is a brothel, that you dawdle in it? Off with you! Almighty Zeus! Have I neglected discipline, that my own man should flout me and defy me when I bid him—"

"Nay, not Neptune would defy you in that mood, master. Farewell!"

"Farewell, Conops. And expect me on the fifth day after you reach Sigurdsen—or sooner! Keep two good men at the masthead. Grease all blocks and reeve new running gear wherever needed. Serve out grease to all the rowers and don't let them waste it on the oar-ports; watch them rub it on the leathers. If I find one speck of dirt above-deck or below there will be Zeus's own reckoning to pay!"

CHAPTER XCIV

CIRCUS MAXIMUS

I know the virtue of a fight. Who knows it better than I? For I have fought against beasts and men, the elements, mutinous crews, treachery, and my own ill-humor. If wisdom, aye, or cunning, aye, or a moderate measure of yielding what is mine, can not preserve me from a fight then let my enemy look to his guard. Peace, bought at the price of cowardice, is too dear. I love a fight that I have done my utmost to avoid—aye, it may be not all my utmost. I am human.

But I rate an animal more highly than the man who gluts his eyes on cruelty, feeding his own foulness with the sight of boughten slaughter. The fish, that slay only what they need, are less contemptible.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

As the fungus grows on dunghills and the burned stump sends up shoots before it dies, life took a three day lease of hopeless men, and there were strange events within the dungeons while the chariot-racing lasted. No stone walls could shut out the blare of trumpets, the thunder of wheels and hoofs and the roar of the throng. Not a criminal down in the dark but knew the names of all the charioteers, and there was actually betting between cell and cell, men wagering their miserable pittances of bread, the doles of water or the questionable privilege of being last through the gate when the time came to face the arena. Last men usually got a taste of red-hot iron.

Dungeon-keepers, thronging at the gate to watch the racing, had to take turns hurrying below to name the winner of each *missus,* as a seven-round race was called; and there were twenty on the first day, twenty on the second. If a dungeon-keeper carried the news tardily there was a clamor that set Nepos in a frenzy for his reputation; and it generally sent him to Tros in the end because he had formed a strange attachment to him and it calmed the old man's overwrought nerves to talk frankly. His sinews stood like taut cords from the mental tension he was under.

"I grow old, Tros, but I never lose the fascination of these last hours. I have seen so many die that you would think I should feel indifferent. I tell you, curiosity grips me harder now than when I first had charge of the slaves who lop the heads off prisoners of war after a triumph. When I trained the gladiators, it was always the same fascination—where do they go when they die? What do they think when their heads are cut off? Why is it that excitement seizes them when the time draws near? Races—that is only an excuse. If there were silence out there on the sand, they would find some other reason to act foolishly. Tros, I have seen men who have been tortured until hardly any flesh remained on arms and legs, laugh gaily on the last night—men so racked that they had to be carried in and staked in the arena for the beasts to maul. Why? What is it that so takes hold of them and makes them reckless of whip or anything?"

"So many men, so many points of view," said Tros.

"Aye, maybe. But one death for all of them, whatever caused it! You are probably about to die. What thoughts are calming you so that you sit and clean your belt, whereas I fret myself? Ho! Brutus! Take an iron down there and use it freely unless they stop that clamoring— The races, Tros, excite me not at all and I can watch men being tortured—aye, and women, without even curiosity. But when it comes to death I must confess that interests me. Tell me, of what are you thinking?"

"Of the destiny that governs us," Tros answered. "I have seen death, too, and I have not yet met the man who must not die. But I believe it is impossible to kill a man until his time comes. And I think that if the gods have use for any one they pluck him out of any danger. But they have no use for men who pray to them and waste good time and energy on whining. I am waiting for the gods to show me half an opportunity."

"But I was talking about death," objected Nepos. "In the next three days eight hundred men, including gladiators, are to die where now the chariots are racing. What think you of death?"

"It is like to-morrow. I will face it when it comes," Tros answered. "In the meantime I would like to meet the miscreant who made this belt. He fashioned it too narrow and forgot that sea-air calls for double tanning of the leather. I would let him feel the belt a time or two and learn his trade; some never learn until it dawns on them that being flogged hurts!"

"Have you no fear?" Nepos asked. "I have seen men so in the grip of fear that they could not feel."

"I am familiar with fear," Tros answered. "It has also grown familiar with me and has abandoned many of its tricks as useless. Now I am afraid of one thing only—that the Britons may believe I have deserted them. There is a king in Britain, and a woman by the name of Fflur, his wife, who love me, and I love them. It would be a miserable destiny to die and leave them thinking I had never even run a risk to protect them from Cæsar."

"But if you went free, could you do that? How?" asked Nepos.

Tros's leonine eyes observed him for a moment. He was instantly alert for signals that the gods might give.

"If I should swear to you that I am telling naked truth, would you believe me and not ask questions?" he demanded.

Nepos nodded.

"I have heard strange truth from many a man in this place under a seal of secrecy. No law obliges me to tell what I learn here. Whoever comes into the *carceres,* the law has done with; he is a dead man and his secrets die too. But if you speak of the Vestal Virgins I will not listen, because—"

"I will not speak of them," said Tros. "But I will say this—if the gods, or you, or any one can get me out of here alive—and I will not go, mind you, without the men who call me master!—I can call off Cæsar."

"How?"

"By turning him toward Rome! That is naked truth, on my oath by the shrines of Samothrace."

"You have a message for him from—you mean, that if you reach him—"

"He will take his eyes off Britain and make Rome his goal. He will believe the time has come to try out destiny!" said Tros.

The Roman throng in the arena roared like mad beasts—shrieked, yelled, clamored—as a four-horse chariot went down under another's wheels. The tumult swallowed up the roaring of the beasts and there were warning trumpet blasts to stop stamping that might wreck the rows of seats. Expectancy silenced the dungeons, until suddenly they burst into a tumult because nobody reported what had caused the uproar. At a nod from Nepos half a dozen men went into the arena, armed with hooks and ropes, to drag away dead horses and a mangled man.

"Their first taste of blood!" said Nepos. "This time to-morrow you will hear them offering money to the charioteers to smash their opponents' wheels! There's little chance for any novice such as your man."

"So?" said Tros.

"No chance at all. They'll roll him in the sand before he goes around the *spina* once. However, I have always thought Pompeius Magnus was a danger to Rome. He has none of the true bronze in him that Cæsar has. Cæsar can be cruel; he has virtue; he is not afraid of anything and he isn't lazy. Cato is wrong about Cæsar, as I have told him half a hundred times. And so you think the gods make use of you and me? I doubt it. That is not a Roman way of thinking of the gods. However, each to his own theory—and death to us all in the end! Well, Tros, keep up your courage. I would like to see Julius Cæsar come to discipline this city! And if Pompey accused you of intriguing with— Who should know better than They what will happen? Well, keep up your courage. It's against the rules for any one to beg their favor or to hand them a petition, and it's death, mind you, to insult them, but listen now! There's no law against, for instance—"

Nepos hesitated. He was actually trembling. Vestal Virgins were a power so intensely reverenced that even in the *carceres* their name was sacrosanct. Not only were they unapproachable, but all the reverence of Rome for her traditions and her old grim gods had centered—rallied, as it were—around the persons of the Vestals. They alone were without blemish and without reproach.

"Not even Pompey dares to put a spite on *them!*" said Nepos. "But do they know you are in here? I'll bet they don't. Who told them? You can't have told them. They will know for the first time when they see you march out of the dungeon gate. Well—there is no law against my changing the arrangements. Listen—when I send you in to face the lions, march you straight to Pompey's box and there salute him. That is something only gladiators are supposed to do. Then turn toward the Vestals in the box beside him on his right hand and salute them. Maybe then they'll recognize you. Who knows? The attendants are supposed to loose the lions instantly when you appear but I will bid them wait while you march once around the arena and let the populace observe how gallantly you bear yourselves. When you have slain the lions, make no appeal but await the Numidians close to the Vestals' box. And the same when the Numidians are beaten and the gladiators come. Then, if the Vestals choose to spare you, they will have the verdict of the populace and Pompey himself will have to bow to it."

Within the dungeon recklessness increased as time wore on. The night after the second day of racing a rebellion broke out and nearly ended in escape. A score of men pounced on the guard who entered their dark hole to feed them, robbed him of his hooked club, slew him, seized the hot irons from the braziers and stormed the stairway leading to the upper cells. Extra guards were summoned from the outside and for an hour there was infernal war by torchlight until all the men who had escaped were roped and four guards, suffering from ghastly wounds inflicted by a hooked club, had been carried out. All the while the fighting lasted Nepos' voice kept threatening drastic penalties to any guard who "spoiled" a man, as he expressed it; they were needed whole for the arena, able to stand up and die excitingly, so it was the guards, that night, who suffered.

"Nevertheless," said Nepos, "they shall wish they had refrained from that attempt. That batch was destined for the elephants, who slay swiftly. Now they shall be torn by dogs, and they shall enter the arena first."

His honor was offended by the outbreak and he even put an extra chain and lock on Tros's cell door.

"Not that I doubt your good-will, but a madness seizes men at times and they act like leopards," he explained. "I have known prisoners to break the bars and kill the other prisoners who would not join them."

But he let Tros out of his cell next day to watch the racing through a small hole in the dungeon wall. He fettered his wrists behind his back and chained him to a ring-bolt in the stone floor, as he explained it, to prevent the guards from telling tales about him; but the truth was, Nepos was himself half mad with nervousness, as fascinated by the prospect of the butchery to come as were the citizens who packed the seats in the arena.

They were yelling now for blood. It did not satisfy them that the charioteers showed almost superhuman skill in swinging four-horse teams around the curves at each end of the course; they urged the men to break each other's wheels, to cut in and break horses' legs, to beat each other with their whips. They howled and whistled when a man won easily. And when the next teams lined up for the start, instead of waiting breathless for the starter to give the signal from his box they yelled advice to the contestants to play foul and hurled abuse to the officials whose duty it was to compel the charioteers to line up properly along the oblique starting-line which was arranged to compensate the outside chariot for the wider circle it must make at the farther end.

The *spina* down the center, adorned with flagpoles and dolphins, was as crowded with spectators as were the surrounding tiers of seats. The mob roared loudest when a group who leaned over the *spina,* clinging to one another, fell and were crushed under chariot-wheels; their bodies tripped a four-horse team and the resulting crashing carnage produced roars of satisfaction that aroused the lions and indignant elephants—so that it was impossible to get the horses started for the next race until attendants seized their heads and some of them were kicked and crushed under the wheels.

It was mid-afternoon before Orwic's turn came, and the din that greeted him from the upper seats was evidence enough that Zeuxis and Helene had neglected nothing that could stir the popular imagination. He was dressed like any other charioteer, in Roman tunic, with a red badge to distinguish him, and came out first of four teams through the archway, in a chariot bearing Pompey's monogram. That meant that he had drawn the inside berth, and the betting odds changed in his favor rapidly, as the mob's voice indicated, breaking into short staccato barks.

There was a breathless silence as the four teams moved up to the line, each charioteer reining and urging his horses to get them on their toes—then suddenly an uproar like a vast explosion as the chariot next to Orwic's swerved in to lock wheels and pin him up against the *spina*—a trick often played on novices to spoil their chance before the race began. But the uproar broke into a tumult of astonished laughter at the neatness with which the unknown man shot clear of the entanglement and, wheeling, struck the offending veteran across the face. The crowd applauded him until the frantic horses nearly broke out of control, and the more they plunged and fought the men who tried to hold their heads, the more the spectators thundered, stamping their feet until attendants armed with staves belabored them to save the wooden floors.

Then laughter; for the race was a procession of three chariots pursuing Orwic's, weaving in and out, maneuvering to wreck each other at the turns, but never coming within lengths of the bay team driven by the Briton, who could hug corners with his horses belly-to-the-earth because he had been taught from infancy to do the same thing with scythe-armed chariots on either hand. The unknown man was in his element. In contrast to the furious histrionics of the others he was quiet, almost motionless. Excepting at the corners, which he took on one wheel like a sail-boat in a squall, he stood erect, his only gesture a salute to Pompey's box and to the Vestals as he whirled by.

Men threw money at him; women, flowers when the race was over. Crowned with a wreath of myrtle leaves he was sent once around the course at a slow gallop to acknowledge the applause and Pompey, ignorant of who he was, threw his own wreath down to him. The significance of that could hardly have escaped even a Northman. Orwic reined in to receive the wreath from an attendant, and as Pompey gave his seat to a substitute to preside over the last three races and turned to leave the box he waved his hand in acknowledgment of Orwic's courteous salute. The last three races were run in a half filled Circus; the noisiest spectators had won money at exhilarating odds, and had gone home to exult about it and to rest in preparation for the much more thrilling entertainment to begin to-morrow.

It was night when Orwic came, spluttering and gasping at the prison stench and pinching at Tros's muscles through the bars.

"A man rots swiftly in a dungeon," he remarked, then laughed, a little reassured because Tros gripped him with a sudden strength that hurt.

"Tros, twenty men have tried to buy me from Helene! I was mobbed out there behind the stables! If it weren't that I'm supposed to be Helene's slave I never could have got here. I'd be drunker than a sailor! She pretended I was in danger from the other charioteers—and that was true, they'd kill me if they had a chance.

"She had her own slaves spirit me away and one of Zeuxis' fellows brought me here after dark. Good Lud of Lunden, what a land of stinks! Helene is now spreading rumors that one of Pompey's men has had me thrown into the arena because she refused to sell me, and that he had bribed the peregrine prætor,* whatever that is, to refuse to interfere. It was difficult for me to understand, because the interpreter she had to use knew only a little Gaulish, but I gathered she is working up a great reception for us. What are we supposed to do? Fight lions? Men, too? Romans? I will gladly take a long chance for the sake of gutting half a dozen Romans! How are the men? And have the weapons come? Oh, by the way; Helene said this, or so I understood her; mind you, she is using an interpreter:

"'If you deny me, you shall lose your ship. If you accept me, you have only to fight gallantly and you shall sail away.'

"It sounded like a threat, Tros, but she is working day and night to save you. So is Zeuxis. I understood Zeuxis to say that Conops turned up and joined you in the *carceres*. What happened to him?"

Nepos came and with a nod of recognition let Orwic into Tros's cell. He was too busy for conversation, but he grinned and jerked his thumb up to encourage Tros. His face looked like a demon's in the lantern light, with tortured, nervous eyes that lacked sleep. Tros and Orwic talked until silence fell, then slept. That night the only men within the *carceres* who did not sleep were the suspicious guards, who prodded prisoners at intervals through cell bars to assure themselves that none had cheated the arena.

CHAPTER XCV

THE LINK BREAKS

No wise man fights. Wisdom solves all riddles, and a fight proves nothing except which of a number of fools can hit the harder blow. To be compelled to fight is a confession of stupidity or worse, and very likely worse.

But few are wise. Unwisdom traps us in the nets of savagery, from which fear finds no way of escape. Then the luckier fool may win, unless the lesser fool remembers, even in the tumult of the fighting, Wisdom that has no fight to win.

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* The official whose duty it was to concern himself with foreigners, presiding over their litigation and, to some extent, protecting them.

The fool says the fight shall settle something; it shall be the end of this or that. Let the lesser fool remember there is no end of folly, but there is a beginning of Wisdom. Let him storm the gates of Wisdom toward a new beginning. Then, though that gate be death, that he assaulted it as a Beginning shall have brought him a little nearer to a true goal. Wisdom, it appears to me, will be at least as useful to us beyond death as on this side.

I have never known Wisdom to counsel cowardice.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

DAWN heard the roaring begin, as the populace poured into the seats to make sure none should forestall them by bribing the attendants. There were frequent fights, enormously enjoyed by those whose right to their seats was undisputed; and the shouting of the sweet-meat and provision vendors never ceased until the vast arena was a sea of sweating faces and the *equites* and senators began to occupy the seats reserved for them—seats that had been specially protected overnight by raising the wooden wall in front of them.

The *spina* down the midst had been removed. The Circus was a sea of clean sand glittering in sunlight. Colored awnings, stretched over the seats on decorated masts threw one half of the spectators into shade, except where hot rays shone through gaps where the awnings were roped together. There was a constant thunder from the canvas shaking in the morning wind. Roaring and baying of starved animals provided grim accompaniment. The blended tumult resembled thunder of surf on a rock-bound beach.

Tros, fettered as before, was allowed to take his place at the hole in the wall, with Orwic chained beside him. Tros asked leave to inspect the weapons, but Nepos, irritable to the verge of madness, snarled at him:

"Govern yourself! I have had trouble enough! I have lost eight good guards!"

There was not an object left, in the enclosure by the gate that opened into the arena, which a prisoner might seize and turn into a weapon. The guards' clubs were fastened to their wrists by heavy thongs. The braziers were set in place behind a grille, where grimy slaves made ready to pass hot irons to the guards; and the first batch of prisoners—they who had staged the outbreak—were hustled in readiness into the irregularly shaped enclosure whose fourth side was the great door that should presently admit them to their death. They all wore clean but very scanty clothing, their own filthy garments having been ripped to rags in the struggle two nights previous; and most of them, acutely conscious of the red-hot irons, managed to look alert, almost eager for the tragedy. They joked. They even laughed. They called themselves the elephants' dinner, unaware yet that the method of their execution had been changed.

But first there was a ceremony in the sunshine. To a great heraldic blare of trumpets all the gladiators marched in through the gate that had admitted chariots the day before and, facing Pompey in a line, saluted him, one gladiator making a set speech. There were about three hundred armed men, very splendid in their different accoutrements, as dignified and perfect in shape and muscle as so many sculptor's gods.

Another blast of trumpets sounded and a mock-engagement took place—parry and thrust with wooden weapons, wonderfully executed but mechanical. It lasted until the crowd grew restless and began to whistle. Then another trumpet blast and all the gladiators marched out, leaving breathless silence in their wake—and two lone, nearly naked slaves who stood beside a trap-door fifty feet away from the eye-hole where Tros and Orwic watched. Each held a rope in one hand and with the other clung to one of the pegs by which they were to climb from danger.

Trumpets again, and some one swung the dungeon gate, admitting a glare of dazzling sunlight. Slaves passed the hot irons and Nepos' men drove out the prisoners, flourishing the irons behind them and thrusting at those who were last. The great gate swung shut and for a minute the two score looked about them, blinking at the rows and rows of faces. Then the two slaves pulled the trap and jumped clear, one of them missing his grip. He was caught, dragged down and worried by the famished dogs that poured out of the trap yelping for their first meal in nearly a week.

The crowd looked on in silence until two of the prisoners, mad with terror, ran as if to throw themselves before Pompey and beg to be spared. A dozen dogs gave chase, and there began to be a snarl of passion, punctuated by the shrill, excited screams of women, as the Romans felt the vice of it take hold of them. There was a choking roar when half a dozen dogs pulled down the runners; and the roar grew to a din that drowned the yelping when the other dogs all raced toward the prisoners who stood grouped near the dungeon-gate.

It was not over soon, nor easily. The dogs dragged some of the frenzied wretches to the sand and worried them, but there were six dogs to a man, all fighting for the victim's throat and stomach. Two or three men fought the dogs off with their fists. One slew a dog by choking him, and with the carcass guarded himself desperately until a great brute caught him by the arm and pulled him over backward. Utterly bereft of reason by the horror of it as another fifty dogs were loosed out of a trap, the remaining prisoners ran for their lives, until the last one went down under twenty dogs and the two packs started fighting one another.

Men in masks then, representing the infernal regions, came out of a door beside the *spoliarium* to drag away the mangled bodies. Fifty men in line, with whips and torches, drove the dogs back through the hole they came from, and a dozen men with buckets scattered fresh sand where the blood lay. Then again the crowd stared at an empty rectangle of sand and two slaves, clinging to their pegs, stood by a trap-door facing Pompey's box. There was a gasp of expectation now. Each turn was always more absorbing than the last.

Nepos had herded fifty men and women into the inclosure behind the gate and they were begging to be told what fate awaited them. A woman fainted; they revived her with a hot iron. A man tried to kill a guard who mocked him, so they tore his muscles with the hooks and then, because he could not stand—or would not—they lashed him with cords to two others and so sent him into the arena when the door swung wide.

This time the slaves released three maddened elephants that raced around the Circus before their little blood-shot eyes saw human beings at their mercy—beings of the same sort that had tortured them for three days in the darkened cage. There was a havoc then that pleased Rome to the marrow. Men were tossed over the barrier and thrown back to be finished off. One monster seized a woman in its trunk and beat her head off against the barrier beneath the

Vestals' seats. Another chased a woman all around the Circus, seeming to enjoy her screams, and, when she fell at last, knelt slowly on her, as if kneeling in salute to Pompey. The crowd took that for an omen and yelled—

"Pompeius Magnus Imperator!"

There was no capturing those elephants. The maddened brutes were ready to face torches—anything. When they had crushed the last cowering victim and flattened his head in the sand they set off once again around the Circus, pausing here and there to trample on a crushed corpse and to scream back at the mob that roared with a frenzy no less bestial than theirs. The gladiators had to march out and despatch the elephants, and that was the crowd's first taste that day of anything resembling fair fight.

They took the side of the elephants, forever popular in Rome since Carthage fell and Rome learned to amuse herself with monsters that were dangerous to friend and foe alike on battlefields. A hundred gladiators armed with spears essayed to corner them and kill them where it would be easy to drag out the carcasses, and each time that the elephants charged through the line the crowd applauded madly, disregarding the pluck of the men who knelt and met them point-first—usually to be trampled, even though they thrust the spear home in the monster's belly.

Teams of horses dragged out the enormous carcasses. The men in masks came from the *spoliarium* with hooks to set under the arms of dead or injured gladiators and haul them out of sight. Fresh sand was strewn, and once again a bare arena sparkled in the sun.

And now the populace's blood was up. They were in no mood to be entertained with any lesser spectacle. The third turn had to be a climax that should glut their appetite for murder—as the men who managed the proceedings well knew—unless they were to yell death-verdicts for expensive gladiators later on. If satiated now with butchery they might let live the wounded men who presently should lie face-upward and appeal for magnanimity; and it took time and money, besides skill to train a gladiator, who, though he were too severely wounded to appear again in the arena, was as marketable as a horse. The fashion of employing gladiators as the personal attendants of even the women of rank had put a premium on wounded men from the arena. And these scarred and grizzled *passé* warriors, decked out far more gorgeously than in their palmiest fighting days, became expensive luxuries.

So a hundred criminals were herded into the inclosure by the dungeon gate—all "enemies of Rome," as Nepos thoughtfully remarked—and they were all clothed decently to make their death the more spectacular. Nor were they thrust forth as the others had been, to stand blinking and bewildered near the gate. They were herded by Nepos' guards into the very center of the Circus and there provided with wooden swords with which to make a mockery of self-defense. One man contrived to kill himself with his ridiculous weapon before the guards were out of the arena, and the guards had to hasten retreat at the cost of their own dignity; the master of the ceremonies ordered the traps raised instantly to prevent other victims from cheating the spectators.

Simultaneously, out of ten doors spaced at equal intervals around the arena came tigers, lions, wolves, bears and a great rhinoceros. The latter was received with roars of approbation, which apparently confused him; for a moment he stood blinking at the sunlight, then turned on a tiger suddenly, impaled him on his horn and crushed him against the wooden barricade. The tiger's claws provided all the necessary impulse that was lacking. He began to attack the other animals, but suddenly grew conscious of the helpless mass of humans in the midst of the arena and went straight at them like a avalanche on four legs.

He was violence untrameled—senseless—an incarnate cataclysm. He impaled his victims, tossed them, trampled down a swath among them, ripped them open, shook the blood and entrails from his eyes and charged until turning so often left him breathless and he stood with drooped head waiting to recover and begin again.

The lions, wolves and tigers were mere supernumerary skirmishers, who picked off victims scattered by the monster. Famished though they were, they dreaded him and kept clear. When he paused at last, and twenty human victims in a group stood back to back to guard themselves against the lions—and the lions sprang in, maddened by the ineffective weapons—the rhinoceros recovered zeal and rammed his weight into the mass, impaling indiscriminately, tossing a great lion in the air and mowing men into a mass of crimson pulp. Wolves tore the wounded. Tigers struck down any who escaped out of the carnage. And the Roman populace exulted as if all Elysium were at its feet.

Then more excitement as the gladiators entered to destroy the brutes that had destroyed the human victims. The extravagance of killing a rhinoceros that was known to have cost enough to feast a whole precinct of Rome raised the whole tone of the orgy in the estimation of the mob; and the big brute slew three gladiators before a luckier one knelt and drove a spear into his belly. Then a dozen others closed in on him with their swords and the horse-teams dragged the carcass out. The last of the tigers was slain by a *retiarius* with net and trident, after the tiger had wounded half a dozen men.

While slaves were strewing fresh sand and the clamor of the crowd was gradually dying to a satisfied, expectant hum, Tros turned and found Nepos beside him.

"Your turn now," he said. "They are in a good mood."

He released Tros's wrists, then Orwic's, and gave Tros his sword. It was the same one he had left in Zeuxis' house. The Northmen came out of the cage like great bears growling, studying the axes handed to them by the prison guards.

"Lord Tros, these are not our weapons! These are rotten-hafted choppers for a housewife's kindling!"

They appeared to think that Tros had cheated them. Alternatively they were ready to wreak vengeance on the guards, who stood back, ready with their hooked clubs, reaching hands through the grille to receive red-hot "persuaders" from the slaves.

Tros examined an ax. It was the sort of tool the Romans served out to the slaves whom it was reckoned inadvisable to trust with anything too nearly like a weapon—half the weight of the broad-bladed axes that the Northmen used.

"Those are the axes that Zeuxis sent," said Nepos. "There are twelve spears for the Britons. It is too late now for—"

"Too late now for Zeuxis!" Tros said grimly. "Nepos, will you—"

He had all but fallen from the dignity of Samothrace! To have asked Nepos to take vengeance on the Greek would have undone in a moment all the magic Tros knew. The gods, whoever or whatever they are, love him who sees main issues and avoids the byways of revengeful spite. It needed no clairvoyance to appreciate that Zeuxis—characterless rascal—had succumbed at the last minute to the dread that Tros, if not slain in the Circus, might denounce him after all. Let the gods pay Zeuxis.

"It is too late to replace those. Probably Zeuxis' slaves misunderstood him. Can you give us other weapons?"

Nepos grinned.

"Aye! Tros, you should have been a Roman! Ho, there! Poniards and targets!"

They were long, lean poniards and shields of toughened bronze that clattered on the floor as fast as Nepos' guards could bring them from the storeroom. And for Tros there was a buckler that a Thracian had carried to his death. A wave-edged scimitar a yard long and a wooden Gaulish shield with iron studs for Orwic.

Then the trumpets sounded and the great gate swung, admitting light that dazzled all the Northmen's eyes. They kept the futile axes—thrust the poniards into their belts—and followed Tros, who ordered Orwic out alone in front of him, ten paces in the lead.

"Remember now!" said Nepos, as the great gate swung shut at the nervous Britons' backs.

The Northmen marched in two lines behind Tros, Britons bringing up the rear, Tros keeping up a running admonition to prevent them from thinking their own thoughts and abandoning their discipline in panic. The enormous Circus and the mass of faces, leaning, leering, lusting—the anticipation that suggested ambush and the unpredictable—the glitter, glare and color, and the hush were likely to have unnerved Tros himself unless he had had men who looked to him to carry himself bravely and direct their destiny.

"So—you will fight as I have taught you when we practised on the upper deck repelling boarders— Room for a weapon to swing, and no more—ranks closing swiftly when a man goes down—wounded crawl to the center, keeping clear of feet.—Each wounded man keep hold of his weapon—pass it to any comrade who is disarmed— Swift with the stab; very slow to recover; eyes on the enemy's—ears listening for orders! When the lions come, steady—and step forward as they spring. Then duck and stab!"

They were midway to the center before a small group of spectators recognized the gallant youngster in the lead. But then, as if some one were organizing a demonstration, they began to shout his name:

"Ignotus! Ignotus!"

Recognition swelled into a roar as Orwic waved the wreath he had received as victor. They who had won money betting on him doubled and redoubled the applause until the whole arena was a-roar with curiosity and new excitement, changing—so it seemed—the very atmosphere. No better man than Orwic could have strode alone to take that thundering ovation; he was to the manner born, and though he walked without the measured Roman dignity, his own was no less captivating. He had won the crowd's mood with a gesture, and the Northmen, ignorant of what was happening, accepted all the acclamation as their own due; Tros could feel their changed emotion as they formed up at his back and stood in line in front of Pompey, with the white-robed Vestals gazing at them from the draped seats of their own inclosure, well to the front, on Pompey's right.

No Vestal made the slightest sign that Tros could detect; they were stern-faced women with their faces framed in white—apparently emotionless; four arbiters of life and death. The obligation to attend the sacred flame of Vesta made it always necessary for two to remain on duty to relieve each other. To the right and left of Pompey's box the senators and *equites*—no interest less thrilling would have brought them from their country villas—sat with faces flushed, their attitude an effort to appear calm although every unstudied movement betrayed tense excitement. They were laughing cynically—chattering—their voices drowned by the enormous volume of the crowd's roar.

Pompey was talking to some one who knelt at his side—by his costume a slave, by his bearing a messenger. A dozen gaudily dressed Romans, men and women,* who were Pompey's guests, appeared to listen eagerly to what the messenger was saying; not an eye in all that sumptuously decorated box was turned toward the men about to die in the arena. The salute they gave was unreturned, although the mob applauded the raised axes of the Northmen as a

* The Circus was the only public spectacle at which the sexes were not separated.

new barbaric detail introduced for their amusement. Tros growled to Orwic:

"Ready now! Lud's luck—and a blow for your friends in Britain!'

He faced his men; and if he felt afraid they never knew it!

"Ye are my men, and I have come to die or live with you. Do me no shame this day!"

Then, with his men behind him, he followed Orwic to the very midst of the arena; and as he turned he saw that Pompey leaned out of his box to speak to the Great Vestal, who was nearest to him of the four majestic women. The attendant slave-women pressed forward as if to protect the Vestals' privacy.* Tros saw the old gray Vestal's lips move. When he shouted to his men again there was a note of triumph in his voice:

"Think you has Odin lost the way to Rome? Does Thor sleep? And is Lud of Lunden rotting in the Thames? Forget you are in Rome, and fight now for your own gods! Steady!"

Faithful to his promise, Nepos had contrived that the lions should be kept in until Tros was ready. He had almost overdone the kindness and the crowd was giving vent to its impatience when the doors were raised at last from five dens and the yellow brutes came hurrying out into the sunlight. There were marks on some of them of hot iron. There was not a second's interval before they saw their quarry and began to creep up, crouching, blinking, stalking for a flank attack—so many of them that Tros never tried to count.

But there was no opening in the solid square of men that faced four ways at once. Tros stood alone, in front, on one side; Orwic on the other to stiffen the Britons, who were not so easy to make battle-brave. And, since they two looked easier to kill, there was a sudden lightning motion nearly too swift for the eye to follow as three brutes at once leaped at each of them, snarling. Then the mêlée! There was not a second to be spared for rallying the men or for a thought of anything but butchery—ax, poniard and sword outlicking with the speed of light as fifty lions leaped after the first against the solid square. One dragged a Briton down and through the gap three lions leaped in, to be slain by Northmen. Bleeding from a claw-wound, stepping forward with his buckler raised, Tros drove his long sword through a lion's heart and turned to face another, stooping to entice the brute to spring, then straightening himself suddenly and thrusting upward. He could only fight and hope his men were standing firm. He found breath for their battle-cry and roared it:

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* The Vestals were chosen as children and obliged to take the vow for a period of thirty years, but it was rarely that a Vestal availed herself of the privilege of retirement and many continued in office until they died of old age.

"Odin! Odin!"

He could hear their answering roar, but it was all mixed up with lions' snarling and the tumult from the mob, until—as suddenly as the assault began—the butchery was over and he turned to see his square unbroken, three men and himself but slightly injured, and one Briton dead. His Northmen grinned at him, filling their lungs and breathing heavily—awaiting praise. He nodded to them, which was praise enough. Three lions dragged themselves away, blood dripping from them, and a fourth, uninjured, raced around the Circus looking for a chance to leap the barrier. The Northmen showed him half a dozen rotten axes broken, but Orwic laughed gaily from the far side of the square—

"Tros, don't you wish those brutes were Romans!"

There was nothing now to make the crowd impatient—not a second's pause. A gate swung open at the end that faced the *carceres*. Numidians came running in, their ostrich-feather plumes all nodding as they shook their shields in time to a barbaric chant, their long spears flashing in the sun.

Tros turned his eyes toward the Vestal Virgins, but they seemed not to be looking. Pompey was still leaning from his box, apparently engaged in conversation with the Virgo Vestalis Maxima.

There were sixty, not fifty Numidians, and they appeared to have been told their task was easy. Their black, almost naked bodies shone like polished ebony as they began to play and prance to draw the crowd's applause. Groups of three gave chase to the wounded lions and slew them with their long spears, while a dozen others stalked the one uninjured beast and, finally surrounding him, coaxed him to spring, when they knelt and received him on spear-points.

Hurriedly Tros put his Britons in the center of the square and made them surrender their spears to the Northmen whose axes were broken.

"Watch your chance. Seize the weapons of the fallen enemy!" he commanded. Then, to the Northmen, "Fight as if repelling boarders! If the square breaks, form again!"

He left Orwic on the far side of the square, for the Numidians were circling to attack on all four sides at once. Their leader, a lean Titan of oil-polished ebony with a leopard-skin over his shoulder, yelled, chose Tros as his own objective—

And in a second they engaged, on-rushing like a wind-storm of their native desert—fierce as fire—undisciplined as animals. Their leader leaped, down-stabbing with his spear—Tros's long sword took him in the throat. Crashing above the tumult, he could hear the crowd roar *"Habet!"* as another black man seized Tros's buckler, bearing down on it to make an opening for two others' spears. Out licked a Northman's ax and bit into a feathered head. As suddenly, Tros's long sword saved the Northman. A poniard, up-stabbing with the heft of all the Baltic under it, went home into encrimsoned ebony, and there was room again—time for a glance over-shoulder.

"Odin! Odin!"

The unbroken square was fighting mad, and through the corner of his eye Tros saw the unarmed Britons crawling between legs to seize Numidian spears—one Northman down, a Briton dragging him—and then a riot-roar as the spectators cheered on the Numidians —a howling onslaught, and the crash of battle in which no man knew what happened, except that the rush ceased and there were black men bleeding on the sand. A third of the Numidians fell back and hesitated, leaderless and numbed by the jeers of the crowd.

"Lord Tros, we stand firm!" cried a Northman, and fell dead. A Briton dragged his body to the center of the square. The other Northmen closed the gap, their left arms measuring the space to make sure there was room to fight. Then Orwic's voice:

"All over, Tros! They have no more courage. Shall we charge and rout them?"

The Numidians retreated and began arguing, until a few took dead men's spears and, rushing to within six paces, hurled them; but the bucklers stopped those missiles easily and the spectators jeered again, beginning to shout for action, booing, whistling, bellowing "Ignotus!"

"Tros, I beg you, let us charge!" cried Orwic.

But Tros was aware of two things. Pompey was still talking to the Vestal—and the great gate at the end of the arena had been opened. Two long lines of gladiators, helmeted and armed with sword and buckler, began marching in with the mechanical precision of a consul's bodyguard, saluting with a flash of raised swords as the last pair entered and the great gate closed behind them. Tros could hardly make his voice heard above the thundering ovation of the crowd:

"Change formation—into two lines—backs toward the Vestals! Orwic, stand by me!"

He bade them let the wounded lie. The pass was desperate. He formed his double line into a semicircle with its ends retired toward the side where the Vestals and Pompey and all the senators and *equites* were seated.

"Now ye shall show me what Odin begat, and whether Lud of Lunden raised a brood of men! Behold—those gladiators drive the blacks against us. Slay or be slain! Give ground slowly toward the wall!"

No time for another word. A blast of trumpets. The gladiators, forty of them, separating into pairs with the precision of a guard of honor on parade, came forward at the run, outflanking the bewildered Numidians, urging them forward with gestures, presently stabbing at those in the rear. The Numidians, clustering, not understanding, then suddenly desperate, broke, surged, gathered again, stabbed back at the gladiators—and then fled before them, frenzied, brandishing their spears—stark mad—a whirlwind. And then—shambles!

It was cataclysm without sense or reason in it—slaughter wrought unconsciously, the muscles moving as the heart beat, without signal from the brain—sheer wanton instinct let loose in an orgy of destruction—with the rolling whites of men's eyes, crimson blood on black skin—scornfully handsome Roman faces under brazen helmets at the rear—a deafening din, like a thunder of surf, from the onlookers—the only memory that survived.

Thereafter, no pause, but a change of movement and a measured method in the madness, with a gradual return of conscious will.

The gladiators smiled, and that was something. They invited death as if it were a playmate; they inflicted it with scientific skill aloof from malice; they were artful and deliberate, their recklessness a mask beneath which awful energy and calculation lurked. They were as sudden as forked lightning, with an air of having all eternity in which to study their opponents' method.

Tros found himself engaged by one young veteran of twenty-five, bronze-muscled, with a glow of health like satin on his skin, and on his lips the smile of fifty victories. He had the short sword of the Roman legionary and a big bronze shield, short bronze greaves and a gleaming helmet; with the exception of those he was almost naked, so that every movement he made went rippling along his skin.

The moment he singled out Tros and engaged him the spectators began roaring "Glaucus! Glaucus!" and it sickeningly dawned on Tros that, though this man might have promised Nepos, the spectators were in no mood to spare any wounded combatant. They were yelling for massacre, cruelty, death, for the uttermost peak of emotion; and Glaucus, all-wise in the signs, with a glance at the crowd beneath the buckler upraised on his arm, confirmed it—

"Est habendum!"

He was still good-natured. Attitude and smile were invitations to submit to the inevitable and receive the thrust under the breastbone that should end the matter swiftly. There was not a trace of malice in his smile when he discerned that Tros refused that easy death. He parried Tros's long, lunging thrust and sprang in with a laugh to crush an instep with his heel and stab before Tros could give ground.

Earth, sky and walls appeared to shake under the thunder of the tumult when the favorite of Rome went reeling backward and fell headlong, tripping over a dead Numidian. He had not realized he had a swordsman facing him—that that old instep trick, and the reply to it, was something Tros learned long before ever a razor touched his face. Glaucus rolled and sprang clear with a cat's agility, and laughed, but he was at Tros's mercy if a pair of gladiators had not cut in to protect him. Mêlée again; a Northman sprang to Tros's aid. Three more Northmen battle-axed their adversaries and crashed their way to Orwic's side. Tros slew two men. The crowd yelled his praises. Glaucus, venomous at last, called off two other gladiators and again opposed himself to Tros.

There was a sharp command from Glaucus. The other gladiators formed themselves into a phalanx. The expectant crowd drew breath like one thrilled monster, greedy for the coming massed assault—the staggering, reeling line—and then, when Tros should have been separated from his men, the final single combat.

But the art of generalship lies in unexpectedness. Not for nothing had Tros drilled and drilled his crew in deep-sea battle practice. They were used to his roar—obeyed it. Instantly he formed his double line into a wedge, himself its apex, bringing forth a roar of admiration from the crowd, who, loathing discipline themselves, adored to watch it.

Gradually wheeling, with a crabwise movement, sullenly, Tros gave ground, offering his flanks to tempt the phalanx to an indiscretion. And because the gladiators knew Fabian tactics would only annoy the crowd, they shouted and came on, aiming their sudden rush so as to cut Tros off from the arena wall and drive him out toward the center where he and his survivors could be surrounded.

The spectators stood on the benches and had to be beaten down again. An ocean of sound, as if the very sky were falling, drowned the clash of weapons. Tros moved on the arc of a parabola and struck the phalanx sidewise with his wedge, splitting it diagonally with the fury of a Baltic blast, his Northmen bellowing their bull-mouthed battle-cry.

They burst into the left end of the phalanx. The gladiators lost formation. They tried to re-form and lost seconds doing it. Glaucus, skilfully avoiding Orwic, plunged into the mêlée, hurling men out of his way, challenging Tros. It was a milling shambles, weight against weight, fury against fury, with the gladiators losing—losing their heads, too, as their numbers thinned. All the axes were broken. Northmen and Britons alike fought now with poniards and spears.

Glaucus reached Tros, sprang at him from behind a gladiator whom Tros slew with a lunging thrust that bent his buckler and went past it deep into the man's breast. That mighty blow left Tros extended, with his buckler useless on his left arm and his sword-point in a man's ribs. Glaucus sprang to stab him between neck and shoulder.

"Ah-h-h!"

The crowd roared too soon. Orwic's buckler intervened. Glaucus, springing backward to avoid the Briton's swiping scimitar, tripped over a dead gladiator.

"Habet!"

But the crowd was wrong again; Glaucus was uninjured—instantly on his feet. There were five Northmen and four Britons down. Twice that number of Glaucus' men lay crimsoning the sand. The gladiators realized their case was desperate—sprang back into line again behind their leader.

Instantly Tros re-formed his wedge. He did not dare to take his eyes off Glaucus for more than a second, but he spared one swift glance at the Vestals. The Vestalis Maxima was still talking to Pompey, who leaned forward from his seat, apparently engaged in heated argument; his face was flushed. There was something unexpected happening. The spectators seemed aware of it; they swayed; there was a new note in the tumult.

But there was also a new move in Glaucus' mind; he spread his arms and shouted. Instantly his men split in two divisions and attacked the wedge on either flank, Glaucus watching his chance to charge at Tros when the weight of the assault should have driven the Northmen back a yard or two and left him unprotected.

For a breath—ten—twenty breaths the wedge held—until suddenly the Northmen lost their heads and charged to meet the onslaught, breaking line and bellowing their "Odin! Odin!" as they locked shields against the gladiators' and opposed sheer strength and fury against skill. As swiftly as leaves whirl and scatter in the wind the tight formation broke up into single combats.

And now, again, the crowd went frantic. Glaucus, favorite of fortune, winner of a hundred fights, had met his destiny at last! Tros had at him in silence, grimly, minded to make swift work of it—ears, eyes, passion concentrated.

There was a blare of trumpets—but it might have been a thousand miles away. There was a man's voice pitched against the thunder of the crowd—but it was a voice heard in a dream. There was a yelping, snarling anger note in the crowd's increasing tumult —but that only matched Tros's own dissatisfaction with the gods, who had provided him no better opportunity than this to save the day. He had no desire to kill Glaucus. He knew he must, and anger substituted for desire.

Glaucus sprang like a leopard—feinted—turned aside Tros's lunge on his buckler—ducked in to get the advantage with his short sword at close quarters. The quick stab missed by a hand's breadth. Tros's next stroke shore away the crest of Glaucus' helmet, the terrific impact hurling back the gladiator on his heels. There was never a doubt about the outcome from that second. Glaucus fought a losing battle with the desperate determination of a veteran—cunning, alert, experimenting with a hundred tricks, now giving ground, now feigning weariness, now swifter than a flash of lightning. Twice he drew blood. Once, with a whirlwind effort that brought tumults from the crowd, he forced Tros backward against a writhing gladiator's body and then, buckler against buckler, almost tripped him. But the effort spent itself and Tros's strength overwhelmed him. Glaucus' own blood trickled in his eyes from where the long sword had shorn the helmet-brass and bit into his scalp. He shook his head, like an embattled bull and sprang in blindly trying to smash down Tros's guard with his buckler. For a second they were breath to breath, and he spat in Tros's face, stabbing furiously, until Tros hurled him backward and the long sword licked out like a tongue of flame.

The sword was swifter than the eye, yet thought was swifter.

"Habet!"

The crowd's yelp was like a thunder-clap. But swifter than a year's events that flash by in a dream, was the vision of Nepos' face—the memory of Nepos' voice—the thought of Glaucus' willingness to wound and then ask mercy for his victim. Between syllable and syllable of *"Habet!"* the point lowered and went lunging into Glaucus' thigh.

"Down with you!" Tros beat him to the sand with a terrific buckler blow. He set his foot on him. Glaucus tried to squirm free.

"Lie still!"

Now he became conscious of the trumpet blasts, and of the man's voice pitched against the din. The crowd was screaming savagely for Glaucus' death; they lusted for the last refinement of mob-cruelty, the fun of turning on their favorite, condemning him as he appealed for the mercy he had so often begged for others.

Tros raised his sword and glanced at Pompey's box. The triumvir was gone! The box was empty! Some of his Northmen were cheering. He could not count how many men were killed; his own head swam, but through the corner of his eye he saw the dungeon door was open. Nepos and his attendants were dragging wounded men into a group. There were thirty or forty simultaneous fights going on among the upper rows of seats, and officials were swarming up over the barriers to enforce order; others were already driving the spectators out through the exits at the rear. But the Vestals were still seated, although their attendants seemed to be urging them to go. Tros threw up his sword and asked for Glaucus' life. All four Vestals waved their handkerchiefs. The next he knew, Nepos was nudging him.

"Down on your knees!" commanded Nepos, signing to his men, who set their hooks under Glaucus' armpits and began to drag him away.

Tros knelt. The Vestals waved their handkerchiefs again.

"That is enough for me," said Nepos. "Swiftly!"

The men in masks were dragging out the dead. One was killing wounded gladiators, drawing a heavy sword across their throats, but Nepos would not let him kill Tros's wounded men. Orwic, bleeding and breathless, came to examine Tros's wounds, but Nepos was impatient. The crowd was raging.

"Come!" he commanded. He appeared to think Tros knew what had happened. "Bid your men carry their wounded. Swift before your gods reverse themselves!"

The dungeon guards hustled them out as swiftly as the wounded could be dragged and carried. The great door of the *carceres* slammed shut behind them, deadening the angry tumult of the crowd.

"That is the first time in the history of Rome!" said Nepos. "What gods do you pray to? I myself would like to sacrifice to gods who can accomplish that!"

Tros answered sullenly:

"Eleven good men dead—and all these wounded! Rot me such a lousy lot of gods!"

Nepos brought a doctor, whose accomplishment was cauterizing wounds with red-hot iron and was bitterly offended because Tros preferred the pine-oil dressing that the druids had given him and which he kept in his haversack. Tros dressed the Northmen's wounds, then Orwic's, then his own.

"There is magic in this," he said, offering the flask to Nepos. "I will give you what is left of it. Tell me now what happened."

"Julia died!" said Nepos. "Didn't you hear the announcer? There came two messengers, and one told Pompey, but another told the Vestals. Pompey would have let the games go on, not daring to offend the crowd, but the Vestals said shame on him and—so the guard near Pompey's box told me—they threatened to predict a great disaster to the Roman arms, and to ascribe the blame to Pompey, if he disobeyed them. They thought a deal of Julia. So did everybody. Rome will have to go in mourning. I will bet you fifty sesterces that Pompey will do all he can to keep the news from Julius Cæsar until he can get ready to defend himself. The link that kept them from each other's throats is broken."

"And what now?" Tros asked.

"You are free, my friend. The Vestals ordered it. But not yet. I will keep you in the dungeon until darkness makes it easier to pass unrecognized."

There was wisdom in delay, particularly as Tros did not want to be seen escaping down the Tiber. But it was hardly an hour before Helene came and sent a message by Nepos.

"Speak through the gate with her," he advised, and came and listened in the shadow where the great steps turned under the entrance arch.

"Tros!" exclaimed Helene, her lips trembling with excitement, "you would do well to make haste! All Rome knows the Vestals have released you. Zeuxis is afraid of you; he knows Conops came; he has warned one of Pompey's men that your ship will try to pick you up in Ostia. The gallopers have gone to warn the captains of the triremes! If you try to go by chariot to Ostia they will find excuse to bar the road against you; they will certainly seize your ship!

But I have permits to take stage to Gaul. None will expect you to take that route. Leave your men. Come with me!"

Tros wondered whether it was she or Zeuxis who had contrived that danger to the ship—even whether it was true at all, although he knew that either of them would be capable of doing it. Helene was as treacherous as Zeuxis. He could read determination in her eyes. He had to invent subterfuge, and suddenly.

"Here are half of the pearls I owe you," he said, pulling out his leather pouch. "Take them. Give Zeuxis this." He produced the ivory *tessera*. "Tell him, I denounce *hospitium;* from this hour we are enemies, to the death unless he can explain how he sent my Northmen rotten axes. You shall have the other pearls I owe you—after I reach Britain—after Cæsar manumits you. Go tell Zeuxis."

"You will come by road to Gaul?"

"If there is no other way. I must see to my men. They are good men. The gods would rot me if I gave them no chance; also some of them are badly hurt. I have arranged to send them down the Tiber. If all goes well they may find some way of escaping to their own land. Meet me one hour after dark down by the fish-wharf near the bridge. I will be free to answer you then. Bring Zeuxis, but see that he doesn't betray me again. Make him believe I love him and would welcome a fair explanation. Manage so that I shall find him where he can't escape—down there beside the fish-wharf in the dark. I think the gods would not approve if I should miss my reckoning with Zeuxis."

"You and your gods! I would give ten gods for your little finger! So would Cæsar!" She nodded, and went to do his bidding, careful not to stay too long near the dungeon gate because of loiterers—and because there was a bad stench coming through the entrance tunnel.

"You will kill Zeuxis?" Nepos asked, taking Tros's arm as he returned into the dungeon. "Better let me have him crucified. I can contrive that easily."

"Friend Nepos, will you do me this last favor, that you let me attend to Zeuxis?"

It was pitch dark when the party filed out of the dungeon with the wounded Northmen leaning between comrades and one carried on a stretcher in the midst. The streets were nearly empty. Whoever was abroad at that hour took care to avoid so large a company of stalwarts, who were very likely gladiators carrying a drunken master home. The slaves at the city gate were playing dice beside a torch and hardly looked up. Nearly all the porters near the bridge-foot were asleep. The long, shadowy fish-wharf, built of wooden piles, appeared deserted as Tros led the way down creaking wooden steps. He saw the men whom Conops had brought, all sitting glooming by a bonfire built of broken crates below a low shed, with their oars like a gridiron's shadow leaning up against the shed wall. And he saw the boats, their noses to the bank within a stone's throw of the men. For one long, hopeful minute he believed he had escaped Helene.

But she stepped out of a shadow suddenly and took his hand.

"Tros, here is Zeuxis! He supposes he is to meet a man who is willing to murder you for half your pearls!"

She pointed into shadow. Tros sprang. He dragged out Zeuxis, squealing, shook him like a rat until his breath was gone, then gave him to two Northmen to be gagged and bound. The men by the bonfire recognized Tros then and ran to greet him; he had hard work to prevent them from making an uproar.

"Man the boats! Silence!" They threw the Greek into the first boat as it nosed the wharf. When that was done, and all his men were loaded in the three boats, he turned on Helene suddenly.

"Are you alone? Are you safe?"

"I have servants yonder. Are you coming? What will they do with Zeuxis? Drown him? Sell him into slavery?"

"He comes with me to Britain," Tros said grimly. "I am taking him to save you from his tongue. If his affairs don't prosper in his absence, perhaps Cæsar may recompense him! Farewell, Helene! You may look for manumission and the pearls when I have said my say in Cæsar's ear!"

He jumped into the foremost boat, but she seized the painter and tossed it cleverly around a bollard. He could have cut it with his sword but hesitated, wondering what treachery she might do yet if he should leave her feeling scorned. She solved that problem for him.

"Tros," she said, "they have ordered out the triremes!"

"How do you know?" he demanded. Whereat she laughed a little.

"Tros, you are lost unless you come with me to Gaul!"

"So it was you who suggested triremes, was it? You who told Pompey to capture my ship? Well, we shall see!"

He cut the painter with his sword and left her standing there. He could see her figure, like a shadow, waving, until the boats swept out of sight around a bend, and the last he heard of her was his own name rolling musically down the river!

"Tros! Tros! Turn while it is not too late! Tros!"

Danger was as nothing to the thought of an entanglement with her! Lions had not scared him half as much! Escape from the arena had not brought as much relief as leaving her behind! All the way down-Tiber, as he urged his men and beat time for the oars, he exulted at having saved her from betrayal by the Greek, but more at having saved himself out of her clutches. But he still had to save his ship. He still had to save Caswallon and his Britons. Row! Row!

They passed by Ostia at midnight, seeing nothing but the watchmen's lanterns and the low line of the receding hills on either hand, with here and there a group of shadowy masts inshore. As dawn approached they rested on their oars and let the longshore current bear them northward as they keep all eyes strained for the three great purple sails. Orwic was the first to see them, yelling and waving his arms in the boat ahead. Tros was the first to see two other sails, a mile apart and a mile to seaward of his own ship, that appeared as dawn sent shimmering light along the dancing sea.

Sigurdsen was standing in to search the harbor mouth. The triremes had put out to sea in darkness and hard worked to windward of him. They were closing in now under oar and sail to force him into Ostia or crush him on their boiling bronze beaks.

"Row! Row!"

By the time Tros stepped on to his own poop there was not a quarter of a mile between the three ships. The triremes' oars were beating up the sea into a white confusion. They were coming along two legs of a triangle before a brisk breeze.

"Out oars! Drums and cymbals!"

Tros took the helm from Sigurdsen and put the ship about.

"Let go halyards! Downhaul!"

The three great purple sails came down on deck. The trireme captains mistook that for a signal of surrender. They slightly changed course so as to range alongside, one on either hand. Tros set the drums and cymbals beating.

"To the benches, Conops! Half-speed, but splash! Make it look like a panic until I give the word. Then backs and legs into the work and pull!"

The *Liafail,* tin-bottomed and as free from weed as on the day Tros launched her in the Thames, began to gather headway. The trireme captains saw she meant to try to escape between them. Judging her speed, they changed helm simultaneously, leaning over in the wind and leaping forward to the shouts of the oar-overseers, their rams awash in the rising sea. The *Liafail's* oars splashed as if the crew were panic-stricken, until Tros threw up his right hand for a double drum-beat.

"Row!" Conops echoed him.

There were seconds while the issue hung in balance—seconds during which Tros dreaded that the trireme captains might have speed, too, in reserve—but he could see the weeds under their hulls. Or that they might have manned their arrow-engines—though it was not probable that they had had time enough to get their fighting crews on board. He beat time, setting an ever faster oar-beat, doubting his own eye, mistrusting his judgment, believing he had overrated his own ship's speed and under-guessed that of the triremes. Wind and wave were against him.

But his great bronze serpent in the bow laughed gaily, shaking its tongue as it danced on the waves. Too late, both the trireme captains saw he had escaped. They changed helm, tried to back oars, let go sheets and halyards—and crashed, each beak into the other's bow, with a havoc of falling spars and breaking timber and the oars all skyward as the rowers sprawled among the benches.

"Catapult?" asked Sigurdsen. "They are a big mark. We could hit them with the first shot."

Conops came on deck to watch the triremes rolling, locked together, sinking.

"Arrows?" he suggested, fingering the 'paulin housing of an arrow-engine.

"Let be!" Tros answered. "Spare them for the sake of Nepos and the Vestal Virgins!"

For a while he laughed at the absurdity of coupling the Roman headsman and the Vestals in one category. Then:

"Have we wine aboard? Serve wine to all hands. There's a long pull and a hard blow to the coast of Britain. May the gods give us gales from astern and no scurvy!"

CHAPTER XCVI

BRITAIN: LATE SUMMER

I perceive that, even as the seasons and the years, and night and day make war on one another, there will be conquerors and conquered, until Wisdom reigns. But I believe we enter into Wisdom one by one. A herd hates Wisdom. I perceive that conquerors can conquer fools; they are already the slaves of avarice and suchlike vices, and among the avaricious Avarice is King. A wise man's conquest is himself, to the end that the gaining gales of Wisdom may fill his sails and, blowing him clear of the shoals of ignorance, storm him toward new horizons.

FROM THE LOG OF TROS OF SAMOTHRACE

A ROW of bonfires on a beach glared fitfully. The skeletons of ships and a mystery of moving shadows on a white chalk cliff suggested through squalls of rain a battlefield of fabulous, enormous monsters. The bonfire flames were colored by the sea-salt and by copper fastenings that men were raking out as swiftly as the timber was consumed; the figures of the men suggested demons of the underworld attending furnaces where dead men burned their baggage on the banks of Styx. A half gale blew the flames irregularly. A tremendous thunder and the grinding of surf on shingle sang of high tide and a gradually falling sea.

Under a rough shed made of ships' beams with a mass of sand and seaweed heaped to windward Cæsar sat, pale and alert, with a list of the ships on his knees. Two veterans guarded the hut, their shields held to protect them as they leaned on spears and stared into the rain. A tribune, cloaked and helmeted, sat on a broken chest near Cæsar's feet, attending to a stream of very precisely worded orders, that were being written on a tablet by a Gaulish slave as fast as Cæsar could dictate them.

"That will be all now. Work will begin at dawn," said Cæsar, taking the tablet from the slave and frowning over it in the unsteady light from a bronze ship's lantern hanging from a beam. "Curius, will you address the men at daybreak and assure them, that though Cæsar accepts disaster he is not resigned to it. Tell them that a difficulty is an opportunity to prove how invincible Cæsar is. The fleet is broken—but by the sea, not by the human enemy. It will be seen how swiftly Romans can rebuild it. And now see who is out there in the dark. I heard a voice."

"Wind, Imperator."

"I heard a voice. Whose is it?"

Decimus Curius got to his feet with an air of not relishing the weather. He was sleepy, and stiff from exposure to storms. He drew his cloak around him, shuddering as he stepped into the darkness. Presently his voice called from where a campfire shone on one plate of his armor:

"There is a man who says his name is Tros of Samothrace. He is alone."

Cæsar's eyes changed, but the slave, who watched narrowly, detected no confession of surprise; only the lean right forefinger went to straighten his thin hair, after which he adjusted the folds of his tunic and cloak.

"You may bring him in," he said.

Tros loomed into the lantern light; the tribune at his side, though helmeted, looked hardly half as big.

"It is a bitter wind that blows you into my camp as a rule!" said Cæsar, "but in this instance the omen arrives after the event! My fleet already has been wrecked. What other misfortune can Tros of Samothrace invent for me?"

"I am the messenger of destiny," Tros answered and Cæsar stared at him, as it might be, curiously.

"Is your ship also broken on the beach?"

Tros answered with a gruff laugh.

"My ship rides the storm. It will wreak no havoc with that remnant of your fleet that frets its cables off a lee shore. I am an envoy, subject to the usages of truce."

"Provide him with a seat," said Cæsar. The slave pulled up the broken chest under the lantern light.

"You interest me, Tros. You are a very circumspective man for one so deaf to his own interests. How often have I offered you my friendship?"

"As frequently as I gave opportunity!" Tros answered. "I am not your friend. I said, I am the messenger of destiny. I wish to speak with you alone."

The tribune, close behind Tros, pointing at his long sword, shook his head emphatically. Cæsar smiled, the deep, long lines around his mouth absorbing shadow, making his aristocratic face look something like a skull. He nodded.

"You may leave us, Curius."

The tribune shrugged his shoulders.

"Cæsar, fortune has not favored us of late," he protested. "You heard him with his own mouth say—"

"Curius, when I let fear control me, I will not begin with enemies who candidly profess their enmity! You may leave us, too," he added, glancing at the slave.

Still standing—peering once or twice into the darkness to make sure the tribune and the slave were out of earshot—Tros looked straight at Cæsar and repeated the one secret word that the Vestalis Maxima had whispered to him. Cæsar looked almost startled, but he made no comment beyond signing to Tros to sit down on the chest.

"Have you conquered the Britons?" Tros asked.

"Very far from it," said Cæsar. "Their chief, Caswallon, is an excellent general with a sort of genius that needs time and persistence to defeat. Their chariots are ably handled. So is their cavalry, and I am very short of cavalry, which makes it difficult to bring the Britons to a pitched engagement. But we will do better when the storms cease and the leaves are off the trees. You may say I have defeated them in one sense. Their army is scattered. But they are able to raid my long line of communication and to harass my foraging parties. I have seen fit to withdraw my army to the coast and to await reënforcements from Gaul. Meanwhile, there is this misfortune to my fleet. So—now that I have satisfied your curiosity, assuage mine. What do you think to gain by knowing all this?"

"I am here," said Tros, "to turn you out of Britain!"

Cæsar smiled.

"I admire you confidence, but I think you misjudge my character. When I invade, I conquer. If you have nothing else to suggest—well, I suppose what is left of my fleet is at the mercy of your ship, since you say so, but—I can imagine worse predicaments. Surely yours is equally unpleasant!"

"I am an ambassador," said Tros.

"So I understood. You made use of a word that tempted me to speak you very frankly. Why not discharge your embassy instead of talking nonsense?"

Tros sat. With an elbow on his knee, he leaned forward until his face was not a yard from Cæsar's. He spoke in a low voice, slowly and distinctly:

"These are the words of the Virgo Vestalis Maxima: 'Bid Cæsar turn his eyes toward Rome! Bid him look to Gaul, that when the time comes he may leave Gaul tranquil at his rear!' "

"You bring me dangerous advice!" said Cæsar. But his eyes had changed again; he seemed to be considering, behind a mask of rather cynical amusement, calculated to make Tros feel he had blundered into too deep counsels.

"Julia is dead," Tros added, turning his head away, as if the statement were an afterthought. He had been eight-and-twenty days at sea. He thought it probable Cæsar had that news already. But the corner of his eye detected absolute surprise. Cæsar leaned and gripped him by the shoulder.

"Are you lying?"

"That is for you to judge," Tros answered. "Are you a leader of men and need to ask that?"

"How did they keep the news from me? I have had despatches—"

Tros laughed. "If I were Pompey I would take good care to keep it from you until my army was as powerful as yours! But I am glad I am not Pompey. I foresee the end of that proud—"

"Very noble Roman!" Cæsar interrupted, finishing the sentence.

Tros sat motionless. The Roman imperator stared into the night beyond him, seeming to read destiny among the shadows and to hear it in the dirging of the sea. The very pebbles on the beach cried, *"Cæ—sar!"* The surf's thunder was ovation.

"It is not yet time," he said at last. "I will conquer Britain."

"Nay, Cæsar! The very gods are warning you! Twice running they have wrecked your ships!"

"Unless memory deceives me, it was you the first time," Cæsar answered, showing not the least trace of resentment. "Generalship, Tros, consists in following an advantage instantly—which is why I doubt you now. You were blind then to your opportunity. Shall I believe you have turned suddenly into a—what is it you called yourself?—a messenger of destiny!"

"Cæsar!" Tros stood up and raised his right fist, holding his left palm ready for the coming blow of emphasis. His amber eyes shone like a lion's in the lantern light. "Thrice I might have slain you! If I cared to deal treacherously, all your legions could not save you now! But I am here to save the Britons, not to do cowardice. Any scullion can stab. And I despise not you, though I despise your aim. You are resolved to conquer Britain for your own pride's sake and for the luster it may add to your famous name. But choose between Rome or Britain. What shall hinder Pompey from arousing Gaul against you and then taking the dictatorship? Is it plunder you crave? I have deposited a thousand pearls with the Vestalis Maxima for you, to make that breastplate for the Venus Genetrix—a thousand pearls, each better than the best that Pompey took from Mithridates and was too ungenerous to give to the Roman people!"

He smashed his fist into his palm at last and Cæsar blinked at him, smiling, moving a little to see past him and to signal to the tribune not to run in and protect him.

"We are not electing a people's tribune, Tros! Sit down and calm yourself."

But Tros stood, knotting his fingers together behind his back to help him to subdue the violence of his emotion.

"Pride is it?" he asked. "You shall boast, if you will, you have conquered the Britons! You shall show those pearls in Rome in proof of it! The Vestal has my leave to give them to you when you turn away from Britain. It is the Britons and their homesteads I will save. If you wish to say you conquered them, you have my leave—and I will add Caswallon's if he will listen to me!"

"Where is he?" Cæsar asked, very abruptly. "I defeated him at the Thames, where he defended a ford with more skill than one might expect from a barbarian. Since then his army is divided into independent groups that harry my communications and I can not learn where he is."

"I doubt not he expects me. I have sent a man ashore who will find him and bid him meet me at a certain place," said Tros. "If I should go to him and say Cæsar accepts that tribute of a thousand pearls in the name of the Roman people, and is willing to make peace and to withdraw his army, I am sure I can persuade Caswallon to permit the legions to embark unhindered. And for the rest—if you crave a few chariots to adorn your triumph, and a few promises not covered by security—perhaps even a brave man's oath of honor that he will not encourage rebellion in Gaul I can arrange that. Otherwise—"

He paused, and for at least a minute each man looked into the other's eyes. Then:

"Otherwise?" asked Cæsar.

"I believe," said Tros, "that you will rue the day you entered Britain! It is easy to befoul your honor by one crook of your finger, that would doubtless bring a javelin into my back out of the darkness—"

"No," said Cæsar, "I have taken you entirely at your word. You may go as you came."

"Go you, also, as you came!" Tros answered. "That man I set ashore has told the Britons how the matter stands in Gaul and Rome. To-morrow's dawn will see that news go spreading through the forests—and away northward to the Iceni—and westward to a dozen other tribes. It will be a long war then, that your shipless legions will be forced to wage—if they will conquer Britain for you—while Gaul rises against Rome—and Rome gives Pompey the dictatorship!"

"I begin to suspect," said Cæsar, "that I underestimated your ability. How soon can you meet Caswallon?"

"I will take my ship around the coast and up the river, to the place where she was built, and see him there," Tros answered.

"Very well. Will you go to him, at last, as Cæsar's friend?"

"Not I! I am neither friend nor enemy. I have brought you a Greek named Zeuxis."

Cæsar thought a minute. Then suddenly: "Oh, that rogue—the contractor? You may have him. He might make a good servant if properly whipped."

"And you owe nine pearls to a girl named Helene."

"You may have her also."

"Keep her. But manumit her."

"She has served you? Very well," said Cæsar. He made a note on his tablet. "Tros, there may come a day when I shall badly need an admiral."

"Aye, Pompey has the allegiance of the Roman fleet. But you shall struggle with him lacking my aid. What shape is the earth? Square? Round?"

"I would like to know," said Cæsar.

"I, too. But I *will* know! I will sail around the world! My father, whom you tortured, prophesied that one day I should serve you. I have done it, though it was none of my wish. But he said, when I have served you I shall have my heart's desire. If I owned Rome and all her legions, Cæsar, I would leave them to whoever lusted for such trash, and sail away. I shall have sailed around the world before you die in Rome of friendlessness and a broken heart!"

"Each to his own view," said Cæsar. "You seem to prefer what is beyond your view. But I think you will die nevertheless, and no less turbulently. I would rather conquer what I see. That seems enough. Come back, however, if you should have that good fortune, and tell me all about your voyage."

"Cæsar," said Tros. "I hope for both our sakes not to meet you again until after death. Eternity—"

"Oh, do you believe in that?" said Cæsar.

(1)